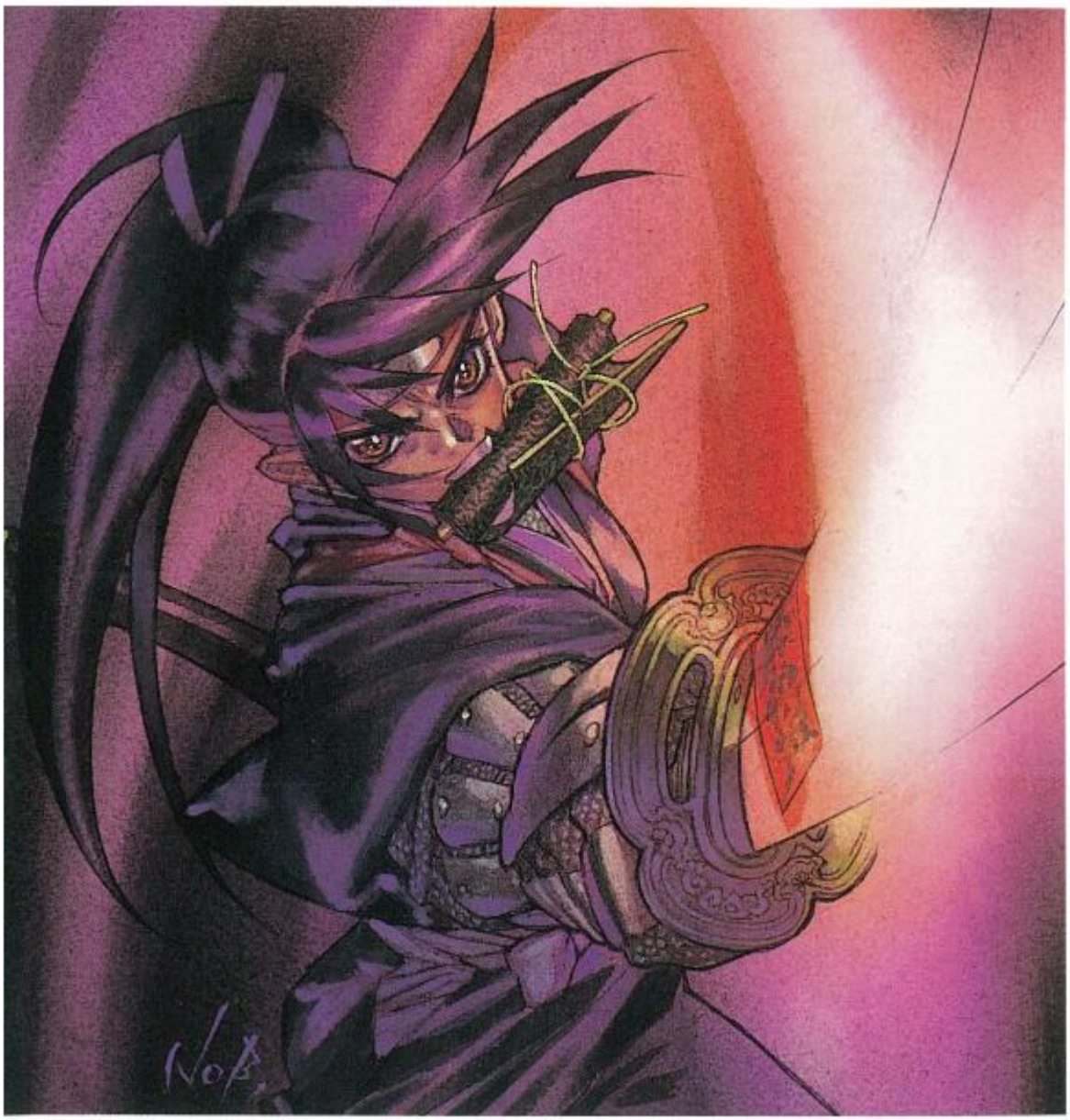
Exorcist Onijuro

When the Jewel Turns Crimson

Takeo Ichikawa



Fujimi Fantasia Bunko

Illustrations by Yuuki Nobuteru

Translation by NineSoulsSea
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Jakotsumaru
蛇骨丸
Kobayakawa Matashiro
Aoi Onijuro
葵鬼十郎
小早川又四郎
宝蔵院
Obata Kanbee
小幡勘兵衛
Hōzōin

Exorcist Onijuro

When the Jewel Turns Red

Takeo Ichikawa

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Map of Onijuro's Journey

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【Chapter 1】

“You must be Aoi Onijuro-sama.” Calling out, the men finally appeared. Amid the torrential rain that had fallen since last night, they were four lightly clad samurai, all concealing their faces beneath lacquered hats, offering a slight bow.

Though dawn had broken, the surroundings remained dim. The grounds of the decaying temple had become a sea of mud. Within that mud, the one whose name had been called slightly lifted their deep-woven hat.

"...I've been waiting." The deep-woven hat adorning them snorted contemptuously.

“The agreed deadline was dawn. It's already past one... Even if it's a summons from the Sakakibara family, the Governors of Unshū, this is a bit of a chilly wait, don't you think?”

The person had a very young voice. They weren’t particularly tall either. A deep-woven straw hat dampened by autumn rain. Black travel clothes caked with grime. The straw sandals, arm guards, and leg wraps all bore the marks of years of wandering - but the size and shape of the swords at the waist, judging by the hilts and guards, were not the sort a ronin could wield. A solid, practical appearance, stripped of all ornate decoration.

The four men with the lacquered hats seemed to understand this fact alone.

“...I apologize for keeping you waiting. Yet this too is my master's command, so I beg your forgiveness. Aoi-sama, your martial fame, your skill—it has long been renowned even in this Unshū province... However, my master's request this time is something no ordinary man could possibly fulfill... In this rain, how long can you wait for us? First, let us see the limits of your patience...”

“…You wish to test it?”

Beneath his hat, Aoi Onijuro's eyes snapped open wide. A beast-like gaze flashed with murderous intent and fury. The four men knew well: never anger him. They understood, and all tensed.

But ignoring their panic, he shook off Onijuro's restraint. He spoke in an uncharacteristically casual tone.

“Then test my skill as well. Was that not why you were chosen?”

“We didn't intend to go that far...”

“Hmm... Then why haven't you let go of your swords since the very beginning? And aren't they trembling?”

Onijuro adjusted their deep-woven hat. Casual movements, casual voice, casual words. Yet behind each, a smile flickered. As the four froze, Onijuro’s true nature was revealed.

Onijuro reached for her deep-brimmed straw hat. All of her movements brimmed with contempt, scorn and fury.

Demon Slayer Onijuro
When the Jewel Turns Crimson

“No need for restraint. Come.”

“Get her!” Suddenly, one lunged. The surprise strike cleaved Onijūrō's woven hat in two. But there was no time to dodge what lurked beyond the torn hat. The counterattack's gleaming blade closed in. Onijūrō's slash, executed without drawing, swept through the first attacker's torso. With a scream, the first corpse collapsed face-first into the muddy water.

"S-so fast..!”

Groaning, the remaining three retreated further. But Onijuro closed the distance without mercy. “...Underestimate a woman, and you'll regret it.”

She held her sword in the yatsuzō stance, eyes flashing.

“If you wish to test my skill, come at me with the intent to kill…!”

Whoosh! A torrential downpour roared past her ears.

Onijuro revealed her true face – a girl’s face. But she didn't look like some sixteen-year-old... A high, tightly bound Hyogo topknot, piercing eyes, tightly pressed lips, and an unyielding fighting spirit radiating from her entire body...

“Saburōza!” Suddenly, one of the samurai let out a cry, directed at the corpse that had just been cut down. Onijūrō flashed a warning glare.

Right before her eyes the corpse twitched violently. Then, jerk, jerk... the corpse began to bounce through the mud.

“So this bastard was the host...” Without surprise, Onijuro twisted her mouth.

First, an arm burst through the corpse's abdomen. A black, bony arm with sharp, hooked claws emerged, drenched in blood. Next, the demonic fetus revealed its hideous skull. Truly an infant. The cursed spirit, with black skin and black eyes, opened its mouth full of fangs and emitted a shrill, grating scream: “Kakakakakaka!”

“Excuse me!” Shouting, the three samurai drew their blades simultaneously. At the same time, they scattered to encircle Onijuro. But Onijuro moved too. Splashing mud, he dashed to the right and swung his sword down with a thud.

“Back off, Okudera!” The warning came a split second too late. Onijuro's blade, accompanied by a whirlwind, bit into the samurai. The opponent instinctively tried to block the strike with his sword.

Onijuro severed both the samurai's elbows in one stroke. The arms, still clutching the sword, were hacked off and flew into the overgrown grass.

“You... you bitch...” The samurai, now armless, swayed backward. He seemed about to collapse. But through clenched teeth, he let out a hideous roar, desperately clinging to consciousness.

“You too...!” Onijuro kicked up mud and leapt swiftly backward. The source of the roar swung his short arms at the target.

Splash!

The samurai's arms regenerated instantly. And not as arms, but as slimy, blue-green tentacles. Each over ten feet long. Piercing through the rain, the hideous flesh whips lashed at Onijuro's sword.

“You bastards, are you half-cursed spirits?!” Onijuro's blade was seized by the tentacles on both sides. Her face contorted at the unbelievable brute strength. The girl's fierce charge was forcibly halted. The swords of the remaining two closed in on Onijuro.

“Your life...!”

“I'll take it!”

The girl's spiritual energy was already flowing from her body into her sword. And in a mere instant, cursed power was channeled into the blade's tip. Onijuro summoned her will.

“Break the Demon!” A black burst of light exploded. The cursed spirit's lightning, unleashed from the girl's sword, shattered both tentacles in a single flash. The burst of light then traveled through the tentacles, reaching the samurai's body. Crackling thunder. The shock of lightning. Simultaneously, the opponent convulsed and writhed in agony.

“Ka... Kanbee-sama...!”

The charred body fell grotesquely into the muddy water.

Instinctively, Onijuro spun her freed sword, barely parrying the blade that had closed in before her eyes. Immediately, she leapt. Clearing the moss-covered stone pagoda, she regained her distance.

Finally, only one remained.

Onijuro quietly caught her breath, inwardly regretting. She should have killed the other one in the blink of an eye. His focus and skill were lacking. “Still an amateur,” she repeated her master's words, and the girl began to release her spiritual energy.

Meanwhile, the two before her were also manifesting their true power. One spat forth a six-foot-long, corrosive acid worm from the depths of its throat. A spirit of a hundred-legged crustacean extended from its mouth, its head, spewing a dissolving liquid, quivered and writhed.

The other too gradually revealed its bizarre true form - its entire body began to foam, then became densely covered in fine, long cilia. Its skin, too, became covered in red and green spots. A coloration like that of a poisonous caterpillar.

From behind emerged a demonic fetus. The infant, freed from its host, laughed incessantly for some unknown joy. It slapped the mud with sharp claws, its evil eye fixed on the girl.

But Onijuro sighed, looking bored. “Even if you're a half-cursed spirit, you're still part of the Sakakibara clan...”

She slowly let a sneer form, then slackly lowered her sword.

“I am an exorcist. My job is slaying cursed spirits. A mere half-cursed god with such pitiful power is no match for me. Shall we cease this tedious killing?”

With that, she sheathed her blade.

"Testing your skill is fine... but if you fight me, you will surely die. Wouldn't it be better for you to live on and serve your house? And wouldn't it be better for your house too?

The fetus's laughter had ceased.

The torrential rain showed no sign of stopping. Soaked to the bone, the four stood facing each other in silence for a while. The monsters were waiting for their chance to strike. But they couldn't move. Onijuro's words were true. Three of them understood that if they fought, they would surely die.

“Forget your master's orders. Leave quickly.” Onijuro wiped her wet face and grinned.

As if taking that smile as a signal, the three vanished suddenly. Nothing remained behind. Only the relentless rain. A temple with its roof torn off. A cluster of stone pagodas surrounded by weeds.

“Fools...” In the mud, two corpses lay exposed to the rain. The corpse that bore the cursed spirit and the charred corpse. Had they disobeyed the order and fled, they wouldn't have died. Onijuro gave the remains a final glance, sighed, and turned away.

“Matashiro, let's go home!”

At the call... a small boy darted out from behind the stone pagodas. He looked exactly like Onijuro in appearance—a deep woven hat, black robes—but he lacked even a shred of the girl's resilience. Peering around with large, round eyes, Kobayakawa Matashiro timidly approached Onijuro.

“Oh, Master, are we returning?”

“Of course. What kind of ridiculous story is this...”

Onijūrō tugged at Matashirō's sleeve and dashed toward a corner of the temple grounds. Only the base of the great ginkgo tree offered shelter from this rain. Master and disciple kicked up mud as they plunged beneath the tree's canopy.

“Making us wait over an hour... testing our patience, was it? When I heard that speech, I nearly lost my temper!”

“You were already furious, weren't you...”

“What?! What did you just say?!”

“.....No, no! I meant... truly, what an impudent thing to say...”

“Hmph! I showed him exactly what happens when I get truly angry!”

“Well... considering that... you only cut down two people?”

“Of course! To slay a cursed spirit, one must use spiritual energy. Would I waste precious spiritual energy within my body on a mere trial run?”

Matashiro offered a hand towel with trembling hands.

“Bu-but this time, it was a request with a letter personally written by His Excellency the Governor of Unshu... Surely the reward...”

The boy froze mid-sentence. Unnoticed, his master had seized Matashiro by the collar, with strength unimaginable for a human. A demonic, inhuman expression flashed as she glared at Matashiro. “How many times must I tell you, Matashiro? You must not choose exorcism work based on the pay...!”

“Th-then... ugh... wh-why...?”

“Trust.” Snatching the hand towel from Matashiro, Onijuro declared.

“Summoning me all the way out here to this godforsaken corner of Unshu, counting on my exorcism skills... and then they dare test my strength? Ridiculous. I won't work for a client who doesn't trust me...!”

“I-I'm sure it's a matter of great importance to your house?”

Still being choked, the boy forced out the words.
“Didn't you just apologize? That this request was utterly impossible...”
“Hmph! You exaggerate!” Displeased, Onijuro released her disciple.
“Most likely, some dead cat appeared as a ghost by the well! It's hardly worth me making a trip!”
“We should at least hear it out...”
“You... Are you questioning your master's judgment?”
“Heaven forbid! It's just, if you summoned the master, surely there must be something...”
“Stop digging, Matashiro...!”
“I'm not... insisting on anything...”
“Surely not an advance payment from the Sakakibara family...”
“I haven't received anything! ...Look!”
Matashiro frantically pulled a money pouch from his robe.
...It looked and sounded suspiciously light.
“Only eighteen ryō left! This is it!”
“So what if we're broke?!”
“Well, you see! We left Bishū Yokoyama-juku sixteen days ago! Since then, the master hasn't performed a single exorcism! If we run out of travel money, we'll starve to death!”
“Matashirooooo!” A flash of rage—Onijūrō's arm tightened around her disciple.
“You! You dare force work upon me?!”
“Guh... it's hard...”
“What's wrong with refusing work I dislike? Making money off exorcism is utterly unthinkable!”
“B-but then our food and lodging... Guh!"
“Where in the world do you find exorcists working just for lodging money?!”
“Then at least the cost of our meals...!”
Onijuro sighed and loosened her grip.
“It seems my teachings still fall short...”
“Ehh! Pride won't fill our bellies...” Choking, yet desperately, Matashiro clung on.
“So, Master... Please accept the Sakakibara family's request. We don't even have tonight's inn fee! If we don't take the job...”
"Well, we'll consider the next job later. If we have no money, we can sleep rough. If you like, you can stay here tonight."
“There's a dead body lying there!”
“Then clean it up yourself.” Speechless, Matashiro slumped down.
But Onijuro ignored her despairing disciple. She had noticed a figure suddenly appearing within the temple grounds. From beyond the torrential rain, the figure approached quietly - like the others earlier, a warrior in a lacquered hat and light armor.
Onijuro cleared her voice. “Sakakibara retainer?”
“Indeed. I am Obata Kanbee, captain of the Jushin foot soldiers.”
Onijuro's hand was already on her sword hilt. No killing intent emanated from her. Only...
(This man is quite capable...)

Yes, she had seen through him.

Barely twenty, a young samurai that one might call a handsome youth. Fair-skinned with a slender face, yet his composed bearing and low, steady voice suggested a seasoned warrior. Above all, each step he took, crushing the mud beneath him, was swift and sharp.

(If swords were drawn, it would be a fair fight...)

He was a warrior who could make even Onijuro think twice.

“I beg your pardon for my earlier discourtesy. To summon you here and then test your skill... It was all my doing. Please forgive me.”

“Those men... were they your subordinates?”

“Indeed. I was the one who had them withdrawn.”

“Then you were the one who kept me waiting?” Onijuro snorted ostentatiously.

“The Sakakibara family... I know not what transpired... but it displeases me. They take us lightly.”

“Your anger is entirely justified. However, fully aware of Onijuro-sama’s displeasure... I humbly request once more that you accept this exorcism work.”

Grinning, Onijuro shook his head. “I refuse.”

“Master!” The boy cried out, clinging to Onijuro. But still smiling, the girl pushed Matashiro away.

“True, I am an exorcist. With nowhere to go and no money now, I see no need to refuse a request.”

“Then, please, I beg you...!”

“Then hire me without hesitation from the start!” Onijuro spat.

“...Testing my skill, are you...? Surely you know my martial fame?”

Obata Kanbee nodded in the rain. “The undefeated exorcist, Tsukahara Bokuden... his first and last disciple... Aoi Onijuro-sama.”

Onijuro exhaled deeply. It was the highest praise one could offer when speaking of the girl. “Even knowing that name, you still couldn't trust me?”

“Well, this time...”

“Understood. Tell me. What happened? What do you fear that makes you so cautious?”

“After all, the cursed deity we wish to exorcise has lived in Unshu for two thousand years, possesses five attributes, and is said to be connected to thirty cursed spirits...”

“Th-that couldn't possibly be...”

Kanbee stopped mid-sentence, his expression froze, and Onijuro's did too.

The girl, who knew every cursed god across the continent, slowly began to speak the name of their enemy.

“The guardian deity of Kizutani... Kizu's Black Crane...”

“You knew...”

“How could I not? It is a vassal of the Southern Mountain God, its name preserved in countless legends.”

“Then you must also know that story...” Kanbee shot her a challenging gaze.

“About the relationship between the Governor of Unshu, my Sakakibara family, and Kizu's Black Crane...”

“I recall it.” Onijuro answered while lightly pinching her chin.
“But it doesn't make sense. From what I've heard, surely the Sakakibara family had a Black Crane...”
“But... it is the truth.” Cutting Onijuro off, Kanbee squeezed out an urgent groan.
“Why... why? Even now, we cannot fathom it... but it is certain Kurotsuru seeks the princess's life.”
“.....”
“...Are you still not convinced?”
“I wish to hear... more details.”
“In any case, we must protect our princess, Chizuru-sama, from that Black Crane's grasp at all costs...”
“Chizuru-sama...?”
“Ah, that one.....” At the mention, Onijuro lifted her gaze. Drawn by the look, Matashiro also strained his eyes through the rain. Having finished his speech, Kanbee knelt in silence.
Behind him... a single carriage appeared, surrounded by about twenty retainers. A lavish palanquin, black lacquered and gilded with gold leaf, pushed through the rain. Guarded by a group of samurai, the carriage was quietly set down at the base of a ginkgo tree.
“This way...”
“Is it alright for you to...?”
“Yes, no need to worry.” Kanbee casually beckoned Onijuro and the others closer.
“This morning, the princess herself requested it. She wished to meet Onijuro-sama, to ask you to hear her plea for protection...”
Kanbee gestured toward the ground beside the lowered palanquin. Exchanging bewildered glances, both Onijuro and Matashiro knelt.
(What? For the likes of us...?) Grumbling inwardly, Onijuro stared at the muddy ground.
“Then, allow me to introduce... Sakakibara Yasumasa-sama, Governor of Unshu, and his daughter... Princess Chizuru.”
The sliding door opened silently. Master and disciple instinctively prostrated themselves. But Kanbee shook his head at the two with bowed faces.
“Onijuro-dono, there's no need for that. Rather, please take a good look at the princess's appearance...”
Onijuro frowned at the strange phrasing. But she didn't let it bother her. Resolutely, Onijuro raised her face. Matashiro followed suit...
“...!” Instantly, the boy swallowed his shock. Simultaneously, he hastily lowered his face. The terror was almost exaggerated.
But Onijuro felt the same. The invincible exorcist felt she had seen something she shouldn't have within the cage. Reflexively, Onijuro also tried to avert her gaze back to the mud.
And yet...
“Please raise your hands...” A voice like a bell gently restrained the exorcist's movement. At the same time... the speaker scattered the scent of spring around them. Warm,

soft sunlight spilled out from the palanquin, lovingly enveloping Onijuro's body, drenched by the freezing rain.

(This is... this lady is...)

Tension dissipated from the exorcist's body like mist, her irritation transforming into calm. She couldn't resist. Filled with an irresistible peace, Onijuro looked up at the princess's face.

“You are Aoi Onijuro-sama, I presume? I am Chizuru, daughter of Sakakibara Yasumasa, Governor of Unshu...”

At that smile, Onijuro involuntarily gasped. The one who had emerged from the palanquin was a young girl. Yet, there was not a trace of childishness or immaturity. Rather... her beauty was complete. Lustrous long black hair, mesmerizing eyes that seemed to draw one in, small lips tinged with a faint color—all these perfectly aligned, adorable features formed the ultimate in grace.

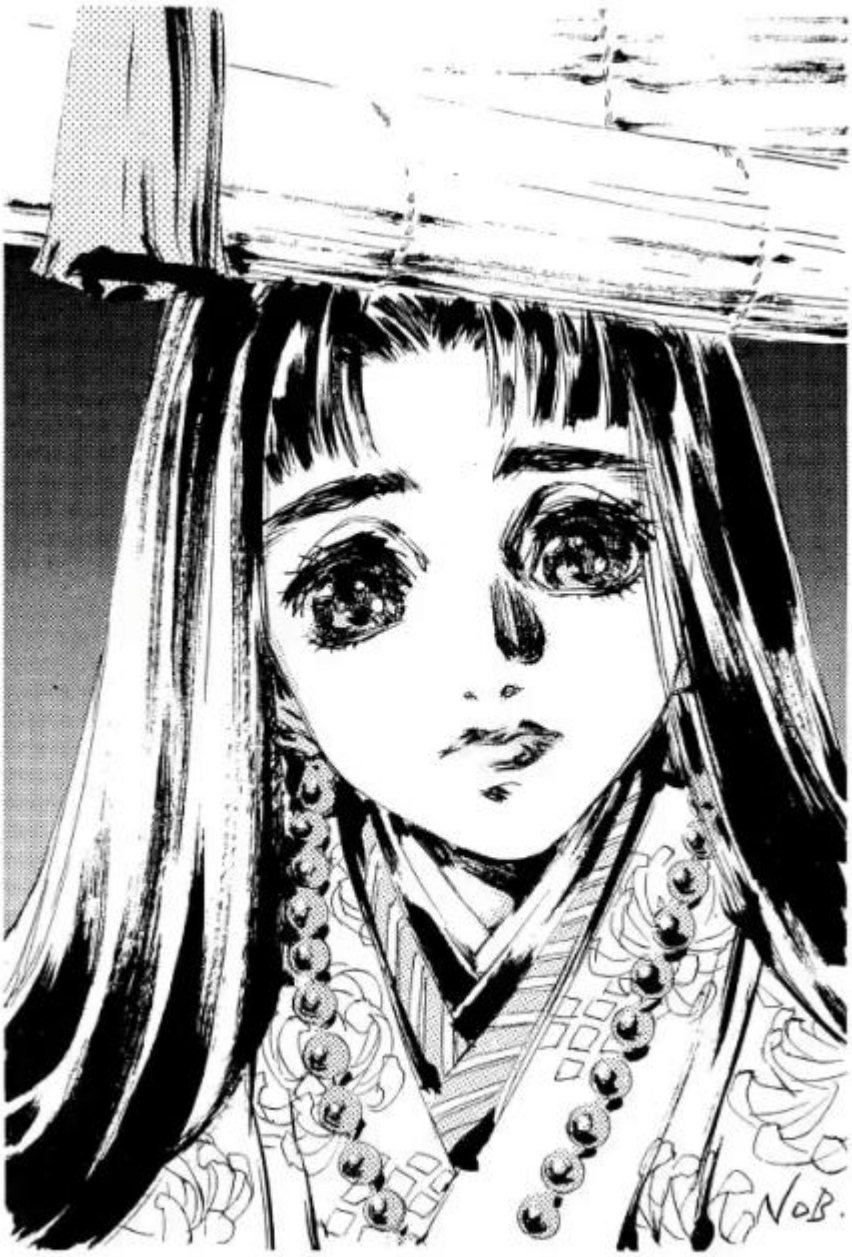
(…This lady is... a cherry blossom...)

Memories of a spring day, seen somewhere long ago, raced through the exorcist's mind. A row of trees in brilliant pale pink, in full bloom. A flurry of petals dancing in the wind. Warm sunlight rippling through the leaves...

“...I wish for you to protect me.” Chizuru's lips trembled slightly.

“Please forgive Kanbee's rudeness and discourtesy. It was all to protect me... To prepare for the worst, he tested Onijuro-sama. Onijuro-sama, I beg you, please accept this request...”

Her voice grew fainter yet stronger. While making her desperate plea, akin to a prayer, she tightened her grip on the prayer beads clutched in her hand. Kanbee remained kneeling in silence.



For a moment... Onijuro stared at Chizuru. Chizuru, too, fixed her gaze on the exorcist. Time passed in silence. The rain showed no sign of letting up. The wind grew fiercer. Yet they all remained exposed to the pounding rain for a while longer.

Their bodies stiffened from the chill... and somehow... somehow, without even realizing it themselves...

“Leave everything... to Aoi Onijuro...” The exorcist's head nodded firmly inside the palanquin...

'It was a long, long time ago.

This tale takes place in Kizu Valley, halfway through the province of Unshu, at the western edge of the continent.

Back then, Kizu Valley was a desolate place, scarcely inhabited, dim even in daylight, a truly lonely spot, they say.

In this valley lived Meiju, a highly skilled rosary craftsman. Though already an old man of seventy, Meiju lived deep within the valley alone, seeking the mirror stones needed for his rosaries.

Whenever he entered the valley, Meiju would always pay his respects at the shrine, praying to the Black Crane, the valley's guardian deity, for safe stone gathering. He was a deeply devout man.

One night, he heard someone persistently calling his name. Waking with a start, he found two beautiful young men standing by his pillow.

The young men remained silent for a moment, then one pulled something gleaming from his robe. It was a mirror stone, polished to perfection without a single flaw. The young man offered the stone to Meiju and said:

“This stone is called a Mijū. Whoever possesses it will be loved and cherished by all. If you make prayer beads with this Mijū, good fortune will surely come to you. Take it.”

Why give me such a precious stone? When Meiju asked, the young man vanished while answering: “You offer prayer beads at Kizu Shrine every year. This Meiju is but a small token of gratitude.”

Meiju thought: This young man must surely be the incarnation of Kurotsuru-sama. Immediately, he made a rosary incorporating the Meiju and presented it to the Governor of the capital. The delighted Governor had Meiju take a cartload of gold and made the rosary a family heirloom passed down through generations.

After that, Meiju never forgot his devotion to Lord Kurotsuru, faithfully offering prayer beads at the Kizu shrine every single year. And so he lived happily and peacefully until the end of his days.

That was long, long ago.

From the Tales of the Three Hundred Provinces.

“Hey, sis! Hey, sis, I’m talking to you!”

A frivolous voice pressed close behind, pushing through the crowd.

“Never seen your face around the castle town. A traveler, are you?”

“First time at the Sakimori Inari festival, huh? How about it? We'll show you around!”

Endless rows of stalls stretched out beneath the eaves. Between them, the stone path leading to the shrine was packed solid with people. The cries of peddlers added to the lively atmosphere. Under the clear autumn sky, the festival crowds reached their peak.

“Look this way, lady!”

“Nothing to be shy about, right? Huh?”

The two grinning rogues pushed their way forcefully through the crowd. Their eyes followed a figure that stood out strikingly in the throng.

Indeed... eye-catching.

The figure stood tall and slender, a loose-fitting kimono draped carelessly over her shoulders. The sleeves themselves were a dazzling spectacle—a pure white base adorned with lavish embroidery of phoenixes, richly woven with gold and silver

thread. And then, the stylish way the kimono was loosely worn, revealing glimpses of her nape. It was an appearance that even a renowned courtesan might envy.

Aiming for the loose, flowing hair tied in a root knot swaying in the wind, the two finally placed their hands on her slender shoulders.

“Hey, lady! You hear us?”

“We'll show you something fun, heh heh!”

At the coarse voices, the phoenix sleeves finally turned.

“Me?”

“Huh?” The revelers frowned, their voices rising in unison.

Their chorus of faces froze. Suspicious gazes swept from her face to her toes, then back up. After scrutinizing her like they were licking her over, suddenly...

“Y-you... you're a man?!” They screamed and backed away.

But the face that turned back didn't seem to care, smiling.

“Yeah, can't you tell?”

“How the hell could we tell dressed like that?!”

“Wearing flashy furisode like this... this guy...!”

“Flashy...? Really?” Looking down at himself, he flashed a bright white smile.

“But I think this is just right for my beauty...”

It was true.

The cool eyes, the high, straight nose bridge, the slender, pointed chin... all were distinctly feminine. And exquisite at that. Yet his smile was gentle. It was no wonder one could be mesmerized staring directly at him. He was a man.

“You bastard, you're wearing makeup too!”

“Well, just a bit of rouge...”

“Disgusting! Are you out of your mind?!”

“D-disgusting, you say...!” The handsome youth started to protest. But the two men turned their backs on him and spat into the street.

“We're done with you! Now get lost!”

“Don't ever walk around looking like that again! You faggot!”

With irritated voices hurling abuse, they tried to vanish into the crowd.

But the young man, his smile clouded, sighed and shook his head.

“There are far too many rude, ignorant fools like that. Time to make them reflect...”

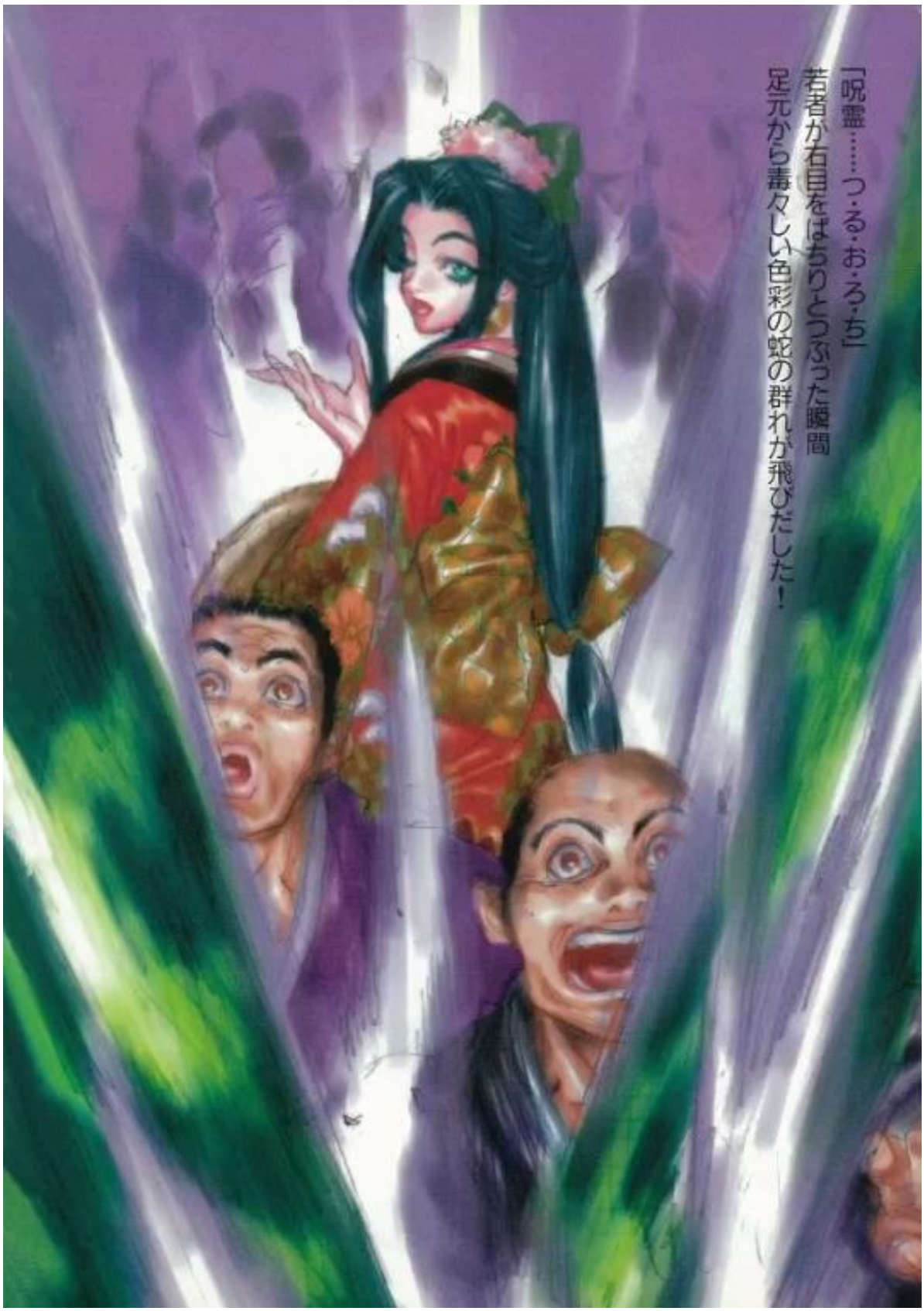
Spiritual energy flowed into the young man's palm. His right eye snapped shut. The instant it closed, it was imbued with charm.

“Cursed Spirit... O-RO-CHI”,

A bloodcurdling scream erupted instantly.

From beneath the feet of the revelers navigating the crowd, cobblestones were suddenly blown away as dozens of giant serpents burst forth. Their bodies were like massive trees. The swarm of venomously colored snakes instantly surrounded the two.

“W-w-what the hell is this?!”



“Cursed Spirit... O-RO-CHI...”
The instant the young man snapped his right eye shut, a swarm of snakes in poisonous hues burst forth from his feet!

“Ah, big broooooo!”
Gaping jaws closed in on the two as they clung to each other. Faced with this sudden calamity, the revelers let out screams of despair.
"Hiiiiii!!” Staring blankly, the revelers looked at each other. Then, cautiously, they scanned their surroundings.
The surrounding noise hadn't changed a bit. The flowing tide of people. The street performer's spiel. The festival bustle, as if nothing had happened. Amidst that commotion, only the two, still hugging each other in a daze, were left behind.
“Hah, hah, hah...” The handsome one hid a bitter smile with his sleeve.
“...Serves you right. That's what you get for calling me a faggot! Serves you right!”
Desperately holding back laughter, he weaved through the crowd. But as soon as he crossed the wide temple grounds, the laughter came back.
“Still, the way he panicked... Pffft! His knees must have gone weak, probably can't walk for a while... Or so I worried, heh!”
A sudden, crushing blow.
A Kongo staff struck him squarely on the crown of his head. As the handsome man clutched his head and crumpled to the ground, a cool voice spoke to him.
“I saw what you did, Jakotsumaru.”
“H-How cruel, Hōzōin-sama...”
“The cruel one is you. You wasted another cursed spirit again. And for such a trivial matter.”
“What if my head got crushed? Ugh...”
“Ho ho ho, no need to worry. When that time comes, I shall give you a proper funeral.”
Forming a seal with her right hand, the still-young nun smiled brightly. Clad in purple robes, she peered out from beneath her hood with a small smile. Staring into the malevolence lurking behind that smile, the handsome youth straightened his back.
“W-weren't you going to look for lodging?”
“I changed my mind. I'll go see the festival too...”
“Then, then I'll go find lodging...”
“What? No need to rush. After all, this is Takinomiya, the foremost post town in Unshu. There should be plenty of inns. You can look after dark...”
“No, better safe than sorry. I'll go alone...”
“Wait. You absolutely must not leave my side.”
In the main street running through the center of the post town, the handsome man stamped his feet like a child.
“Ugh! Why won't you let me go alone, Hōzōin-sama...!”
“If I left you alone, who knows what you'd get up to...”
Sighing, the nun called Hōzōin swiftly thrust the six-foot vajra staff she held in her hand.
“Anyway, the purpose of this journey is to visit the sacred sites of the Western Regions. This is no sightseeing trip.”
“I-I understand...”

“And above all, no shameful antics. You may be unknown in this province, but you are Jakotsumaru, the cursed spirit user renowned throughout the land.”

“I understand...”

“Well, wasting cursed spirits is one thing, but what worries me most is that you are far too...”

“Whoaah! There's a handsome guy over there...!”

Another shock. Direct hit to the brain.

“I won't fall for that trick.”

“Guh... Guhhh...!”

The nun looked down at the trembling cursed spirit user, Jakotsumaru, with a sorrowful smile. “In any case, refrain from acting as you usually do. When your seizures strike, you lose all restraint. You cannot tell right from wrong. To prevent that, I must keep a close watch on you...”

“Y-you're absolutely right...” Jakotsumaru bared his fangs silently in the shadows.

At that very moment…

“Make way!”

A harsh voice suddenly echoed through the air.

From the far end of the street, a mounted warrior charged forward, spear raised. The crest on his banner belonged to the Sakakibara family, the provincial governor. The soldier, clad in armor, spurred his horse straight toward the central crossroads of the post town.

"Ah, danger…!"

Startled by the charge, Jakotsumaru shoved Hōzōin under the eaves. The crowd parted to the sides. But there was no need for worry. The horseman abruptly halted before them, and the soldier delivered the advance guard's proclamation.

"Make way, all of you! This is the procession of His Lordship the Governor escorting Princess Chizuru to her wedding! The procession travels eastward through the domain of Zenshu Province, so all must make way!"

“The princess's wedding procession...?”

Hōzōin uttered the words and looked up at Jakotsumaru in surprise. But it was too late. The handsome face was already grinning broadly. Drawn by the mounted warrior's voice, Jakotsumaru swayed and was pulled toward him.

“The princess... this Unshū's... ? Heh heh!”

The eerie laughter made Hōzōin feel dizzy.

“It's back... that sickness...” But Jakotsumaru ignored Hōzōin's concern. Already, a dense crowd had gathered on both sides of the street to watch the procession. Approaching the rear of the crowd, the Cursed Spirit User stared at his right hand.

“Huh huh huh... Peeping Eye Worm...”

Instantly, the cursed spirit summoning of the Cursed Spirit activated. His outstretched right palm began to tremble violently. Just as he thought that, the center of his palm slowly began to swell.

The bulge grew to the size of a chestnut, and then... eyelids opened. Blink. Jakotsumaru, who had created this third eye, stretched his palm above the heads of the crowd.

“Oh! So that's the wedding procession...!”

The Peeping Eye Worm's gaze firmly locked onto the front of the procession entering the post town. The entire procession numbered about one hundred and fifty.
Guarded by over fifty armed men, a line of trunks advanced along the main road. Further along the center of the procession followed a black lacquered vehicle. The Sakakibara family crest was boldly painted upon it. It was a wedding procession befitting a governor's household.
“As expected of Lady Chizuru's wedding procession, it's truly magnificent!”
“Well, of course! It's a union between two governors!”
“I'd love to ride in a palanquin like that someday.”
Ignoring the chatter of the onlookers, Jakotsumaru focused his third eye. But a casual remark caught his ear, instantly worsening his condition.
“Still, getting married at thirteen is awfully young...”
His throat... made a sound. Then Jakotsumaru's face flushed, blood rushing to his head. The handsome man wiped away overflowing drool and forced his way through the crowd.
“S-sorry, excuse me... let me through...”
“What are you doing, Jakotsumaru...”
“Ah, Hōzōin-sama, you're here...”
“I've been here all along...!”
Sensing the worst possible situation, Hōzōin shot him a look of utter contempt.
“You wish to see her so badly, that princess...”
“Oh, nothing... just something to talk about...”
“I heard it too, you said she was thirteen...” Jakotsumaru froze for a moment...
“Ha ha ha! Is that so, Hōzōin-sama? Then she's still a child!”
“Therefore, she is not to your taste, is she!”
Amidst the clamor, a silence fell between just the two of them...
“You saw through me.”
“Yes, I have, for a very long time.”
“Then cast aside your shame, and step forward with dignity...!”
“I will not!” His collar seized forcefully, Jakotsumaru was dragged away from the crowd.
“But everyone is watching too!”
“They're fine! They're the gaze of subjects celebrating the princess's wedding procession!”
“Then, mine is...”
“...the gaze of a pedophile!” She declared it resolutely.
"Understand, Jakotsumaru! You serve me! Since you're not ordained, I won't demand you renounce women entirely! But..."
“Ha ha... I'm tired of that speech.”
In a flash, the tip of the Kongo staff struck Jakotsumaru's solar plexus hard. From point-blank range.
“Guh, guh...!”
“You require immediate discipline. Rise. We shall find lodging.”
“But lodging... could wait until after dusk...”
“You change your mind again. We shall find it now.”

“Then perhaps the same inn as the procession...”
"Ho ho, what nonsense. Tonight we shall sleep in the open. If we stay in town, who knows what mischief you might get up to..."
Sighs escaped the crowd. The black lacquered palanquin, its occupant unseen, seemed to have entered the representative's residence. Even at a glance, it was clear from the inn town: an elegant, plastered storehouse-style house.
Jako-maru's eyes flashed. A vicious gaze fixed on the purple monk's robe. Grinding his back teeth, the cursed spirit user plotted. “Well then, Hōzōin-sama...” Suddenly, Jakotsumaru flashed a pathetic smile at the nun dragging him along.
“If we must sleep rough, at least let us gather ingredients for supper in town...”
“I see. Very well.”
“And... perhaps... some sake... would you care for some?”
Twitch. Hōzōin's expression stiffened. “...No. Tonight, I...”
“But then, if we're talking about Takinomiya in Unshu Province, I'm sure the local sake is famous... What was it called? Hmm...”
“.....”
“That renowned brand... Hmm...”
“...Takikiri...”
"Oh, that's it! After all, we're sleeping outdoors. Your Highness, you mustn't catch cold in the night breeze. Let us buy some to ward off the chill."
Silently, the nun nodded.
The wedding procession seemed to have entered the mansion, and the crowd began to disperse. But, stealing a glance at the scene, the cursed spirit user smiled to himself.
(Chizuru-sama... Tonight, without fail...) The eerie smile held the certainty of victory.

The residence stood at the heart of Takino-miya.
Within the high plaster walls lay a spacious garden with excellent views. The walls and sightlines were ample to deter intruders. Furthermore, the residence of the local magistrate was guarded by dozens of torches. The soldiers guarding the bride showed no sign of relaxing their vigilance even as midnight approached.
Aoi Onijuro remained standing by the lattice window, her gaze fixed intently on the vast inner courtyard.
“Are you so concerned about the situation outside?” Chizuru asked from behind her. Chizuru’s voice was soft and cool. Yet, without breaking his stare, Onijuro merely replied in a low tone.
“It is my duty to be concerned...”
“But Kanbee and the others should be watching outside... Might this be excessive caution?” The innocent voice came from deep within the thick, billowing steam. Even if she turned, she wouldn't see her face, or even her figure.
With a splash, the scent of medicinal bathwater tickled Onijuro's nostrils. The lavish cypress-wood bathhouse was easily ten tatami mats in size. Even as the inn's representative, it was the regular lodging for the Sakakibara family, the feudal

lord's household, and the building was meticulously crafted. Rising from the large tub, the girl asked once more.

“While being protected by you, Onijuro-sama... it may seem strange to ask this, but...”

Onijuro did not turn around. She merely sensed the girl, her employer, behind her.

Two maids should have attended the girl after her bath. Including Onijuro, there were four of them. All were clad in white yukata, showing no skin.

“Better safe than sorry. After all, I am the only one who can protect Lady Chizuru now.”

“You have the heart of a samurai, not a woman.”

“Indeed, since I walked the path of exorcism, I no longer consider myself a woman...”

She said, wiping sweat from her brow. But Onijuro's words left the atmosphere silent for a moment.

“...Why? Why did you... abandon being a woman?”

“The princess must find this most puzzling.”

Sensing her nod, the exorcist scratched her nose.

"...In this world, there are cursed gods who prey upon a woman's very nature. The troubles, the shame... even their joys and sorrows — those wicked cursed spirits exploit them."

“So...you abandoned your femininity?”

“Indeed...I forgot. It served the exorcist's purpose better...”

“And that's why you don't bathe?”

"To reveal oneself breeds shame. That very shame becomes an opening for them to exploit. Moreover, should the need arise, a body freshly bathed would be of no use..."

Quietly, the sound of flowing water could be heard. Into the bathhouse, along with the night breeze, came the chirping of insects. Autumn had already deepened along the Unshū Road.

“Even so... aren't you completely unarmed...” The presence voiced the obvious question. “How can you protect me with bare hands?”

The employer desperately tried to understand this mysterious exorcist. That honest question almost made her laugh, but Onijuro wasn't learned enough to mock ignorance. Swallowing hard to hide her thoughts, the exorcist replied.

“...No, it is true I am unarmed. I must appear unreliable. But if I were to bring my precious sword here, it would rust in the bathwater.”

“Then how... will you protect me?”

“With the power of cursed spirits.” Onijuro stated it simply.

"Cursed spirits are beings possessing spirit bodies. To sever a spirit body, one requires the power of cursed spirits. With spiritual energy within my body and cursed power within my heart, I can imbue even these fists with the power of cursed spirits and protect you, Princess. That much, this Aoi Onijuro swears and promises." momentary silence fell over the bathhouse. Yet, feeling the earnest gaze on her back, Onijuro still did not turn around. She knew it was rude.

Yet the voice behind her carried no hint of reproach, only sincere gratitude.

“If this is from Onijuro, whom all have deemed worthy to join your escort this time. The foremost exorcist of our age... I believe those words.”

Without turning, Onijuro offered her thanks. Still clad in her white yukata, she remained by the window, yet her ears caught the footsteps of the maids departing.
“Have you finished bathing already?”
“No... I have something I wish to ask you, Onijuro-sama...” The tone suddenly grew formal. Though bracing herself inwardly, Onijuro nodded in a friendly voice.
“...Go ahead. Is it something... you don't wish the others to hear?”
“Why... why do you avert your eyes from my form, Onijuro-sama? Why?”
Her voice demanded an answer, leaving no room for evasion.
“It's nothing, I...”
“No, you are averting your eyes.”
"That is not the case. Just five days ago, in that storm-ravaged temple, I saw the princess in the palanquin..."
“Then turn to face me.” The tone brooked no argument. A moment's hesitation. Clenching her fists impatiently, Onijuro swallowed hard.
“...I cannot.”
“Why not?”
“Must I say it?”
“...Do you not consider this... rude...?” A quiet voice, the first accusation. The employer's desperate reproach made Onijuro's chest ache sharply. It couldn't be helped. That resigned voice reluctantly coaxed the exorcist's words out.
“That rosary... Do you still have it?” This time, behind the voice... a hesitation. But soon, a nod. Exhaling heavily, Onijuro bit her lip. “...That is why.”
“What... do you say this rosary is?”
“Do you think I don't know?” The exorcist girl leaned her sturdy back against the wall.
“The family heirloom rosary... famed in folktales for incorporating the enchanted bead... a gift from Kurotsuru, the guardian deity of Kizutani...”
“...Y-yes. That's why Father... said he would give it to me... for this marriage...”
“And he told you to keep it close at all times...”
“What exactly displeases you about that...!”
“Quite the opposite, my lady.” Quietly... Onijuro suppressed her rising agitation. With a resigned smile, the exorcist crossed her arms. "...Quite the opposite, Chizuru-sama. I am captivated by your rosary, Princess... and by you, wearing that rosary. Utterly, hopelessly captivated."
The heavy confession caused the presence behind her to flinch.
“W-What on earth...”
“You must know yourself. When I first gained your favor... in that ruined temple... do you remember the look on my face when I peered at you through the palanquin, Princess Chizuru?”
Holding her breath, the employer fell silent.
“I was instantly... captivated. And later I understood. I was captivated by the Princess's rosary, by the cursed spirit's power it eternally radiates...”
“.....”
“At that moment, the anger I felt toward Kanbee-sama, the desire to leave Unshu immediately... vanished the instant I saw you, princess...”

“.....”
“The moment I beheld your face, I resolved: I shall heed this princess's request. I shall protect this princess.”
“So... you dislike feeling that way...?”
“No, that’s not it. It’s not that I dislike protecting the princess, but simply...” Onijuro chose her words carefully. “I dislike that it is the power of cursed spirits that makes me feel this way... I cannot help it.”
Outside the window, the night wind stirred the treetops.
The moon slowly hid behind the clouds. Watching the large, leafy trees rustle and dance, Onijuro continued. “My enemies are demons who wield cursed spirits... cursed gods, that is. To avoid being consumed by those cursed spirits, I forgot about femininity, honed my sword skills, and studied cursed spirits myself. Naturally, I believe I've also acquired the power to repel my enemies' cursed spirits.”
“And not being affected by cursed spirits is necessary for a strong exorcist, is it not...”
“If I am cursed, I lose.” She stated it with cold resolve. Onijuro had grown weary of roundabout excuses. “I simply detest being consumed by cursed spirits. When I take on a job, I wish to decide with conviction, based on my own feelings. Even if it concerns the princess's treasure...”
“Well now... I understand.”
“If I must protect someone, I wish to protect someone I genuinely care for... Yet, to care for someone because of a cursed spirit's power... I cannot accept that.”
“So you dislike being... controlled by this cursed spirit... by these beads?”
Clink. The beads rubbed together. Indeed, in a single phrase... that was it.
“I also asked Kanbee-sama...”
“It matters not.”
“Truly, I have no recollection of being targeted by Kurotsuru...”
She started to speak, then bit her lip. Even to herself, it felt like a rude, foolish question.
“.....”
“Did you go to Kizutani as well?” The presence shook its head in denial.
Sighing in self-reproach, Onijuro lowered her gaze. “It seems I... have only caused unnecessary worry and committed rude acts toward the princess I should protect...”
“It is fine. I rely on you.”
“It is not that I dislike you...”
“Ah, I was worried about that very thing... so I ended up questioning you...”
“So I did cause you unnecessary worry...”
“No... if that's the case... I won't press you anymore... absolutely not.”
With a bright, relieved voice, the sliding door clicked open.
“You're leaving, then?”
“Yes, I lingered too long.”
“Then I shall also...”
“Onijuro-sama, you need not trouble yourself.” With a smile, the presence withdrew to the changing room where the maidservant waited. “You've been staring outside this whole time... haven't you even once stepped into the bath?”
“My duty here is not bathing...”

“No, don't mind me. Bathe, then come out. Take your time.”
“But then my duty to guard...”
Yet the employer lit up with a dazzling brightness in her laughter. “I've already finished my bath. From here on, even a man can guard you...”
With that, she quietly closed the door behind her. Along with her instructions to the maids, the employer's footsteps soon faded away.
A quiet presence crossed the corridor. It was a light-footed gait, as if some weight had been lifted. Noticing the sense of relief in the presence, Onijuro also let out a sigh of relief.
And the spacious bathhouse was now Onijuro's alone. Finally relaxing her tension, the exorcist glanced behind her. Instantly, the scent of medicinal baths filled the air. The large tub was brimming with water.
“I suppose I should just soak slowly and get out...”
Somehow, a weight lifted from Onijuro's heart too. For the first time in ages, she felt like washing a woman's hair “slowly.” In that mood, the exorcist began to untie her yukata sash...

From the western sky, a long, sprawling cloud obscured the moon.
A line of bonfires floated in the dark night. They alone illuminated the residence of Isogai Hachiemon. Kobata Kanbee patrolled among the samurai guarding the longhouse gate in plain clothes, calling out as he went.
“All quiet?”
“Aye, nothing out of the ordinary.”
"Don't let your guard down. The enemy could strike at any moment."
But then, a young samurai leaned in. “Even if she's a cursed spirit user, against this force...”
“Don't let your guard down. They say cursed spirits prey on arrogance and carelessness.”
Saying this, Kanbee gave a slight smile. “Well, that's Onijuro-sama's favorite saying.”
“Is that girl truly reliable?”
“She is. Against cursed spirits, she's more certain than a thousand soldiers. I guarantee it.”
“They say she took twenty tengu heads in Rikushu...”
Squinting into the crackling bonfire, Kanbee shook his head solemnly.
“Listing her feats would fill dozens of scrolls. She's a first-rate exorcist, worthy of entrusting with great matters.”
“It's hard to believe offhand...”
“You don't believe me?”
“If I saw her exorcism skills before my eyes, it might be different...”
“Nonsense,” Kanbee continued smiling.
"It wouldn't do for her to appear so easily. If nothing happens, that's perfectly fine."
Saying this, he picked up a small branch at his feet.
But his hand...
...froze. His gaze, sensing something, slowly turned toward the darkness beyond. His conversation partner also hurriedly strained his eyes. Yet Kanbee, maintaining a

calm expression, straightened his back. Sensing the tension, the surrounding samurai also placed their hands on their weapons.

From deep within that darkness...

“Sumotoro!” A voice suddenly rang out.

“Sumotoro! Samurai-sama, let's wrestle!”

The figure that appeared was stark naked. Naturally, it was a child. A boy of perhaps five or six, his bangs neatly trimmed, was hopping closer.

“What? A child...” A weary voice signaled to the small man holding the eight-foot pole. Nodding, the two men swung their poles around with obvious annoyance.

“Hey! What the hell is this in the middle of the night...!”

“Go! Go over there!” They made gestures as if shooing away a dog. But the child paid no heed and clung to them.

“Hey, let's play, sir! Let's wrestle!”

The samurai burst into laughter at this absurd, selfish demand.

“In the dead of night... where did this kid...?”

Kanbee's brow furrowed in momentary doubt. But... just as he dismissed it with a laugh and started to walk away, it happened.

“Th-this brat!” The servant's scream made Kanbee turn around. It wasn't just Kanbee. Everyone guarding the longhouse gate stood gaping in shock.

“Stop it! Stop right now!”

“Hey, you old man!” The innocent voice pleaded. But the child's right hand, gripping the thrust-out eight-foot pole, had already shifted it vertically. Without any effort, along with the guard.

“Wh-what are you doing? Let go!”

The tip of the pole, pointed straight into the darkness, had the guard clinging tightly to it. Swinging it around with one hand, the child let out an excited squeal.

“Wow, it's like a carp streamer!”

“Idiot! Stop shaking it!”

“Hey! Get down! What are you doing?!”

“Huh? This is weird! My hands won't let go!”

Like spinning a newly bought pinwheel, the child swung the eight-foot pole left and right. The man clutching the pole closed his eyes in sheer terror.

The samurai were stunned by that monstrous strength. A natural suspicion welled up in everyone's chest. And all their gazes turned back to Kanbee at once.

“Cut him down!” Kanbee, silently ordered and then roared. “He may look like a child, but that strength is truly that of a cursed god! He must be the one targeting Lady Chizuru's life!”

“Oh... oh!”

“Keii, the flute player! Sound the alarm within the residence!” Shouting, he dashed out first. His sword was already drawn. Kanbee charged at the child, his swift feet closing the distance in an instant.

“Hiiii!” A servant trying to grab the staff from the child was shoved aside. Unfazed, Kanbee struck first - he flashed his naked blade swiftly through the dark night.

“Dieeeee!”

“Ow!” Angry shouts and a weak cry crossed paths. Startled, Kanbee drew back. Right before his eyes, the thug fell with a thud. Next, the eight-foot pole, split clean in two, clattered to the ground.
Kanbee quietly sheathed his sword.
“Kanbee-sama!”
“Obata-san!” He calmly silenced the voices rushing toward him.
“The brat... it vanished...” There was no child anywhere. Searching for the corpse he should have cut down, Kanbee scanned the surroundings.
“What was that child just now...?”
“It was clearly a cursed spirit... In any case, inform everyone to prepare. The enemy is nearby.”
With a chorus of acknowledgment, the soldiers scattered throughout the residence.
But Kanbee still sensed the lingering evil aura around him and hesitated to move from the spot. Some... abhorrent gaze. A chill of dread ran down Kanbee's spine.

“My, what an impatient samurai.”
The evil aura murmured from the mansion's roof.
"But with this... infiltration successful. Huh huh huh....."
Squeezing the crystal ball in his palm, the evil spirit stifled a lecherous chuckle.....

“How is the water temperature, Master?”
Matashiro's voice came from outside the lattice window. The steam escaping through the window carried the scent of medicinal herbs. Gazing at the rising steam, Onijuro gave a half-hearted “Ah.”
“So it was you, Matashiro? Why on earth are you the bath attendant...?”
“Was it not Master's command?!” The exasperated voice rang with indignation.
“Did you not say splitting firewood is sword training? That I should apply myself diligently?!”
“Did I say such a thing...?”
“You entrusted me to yourself, saying I'd do anything, so please put me to work...”
“Ah, come to think of it, that's right...”
“Again with that, Master...”
At his disciple's words, the exorcist couldn't help but let a smile escape. Teasing Matashiro meant she was in a good mood. Immersed in the medicinal bath up to her shoulders, Onijuro reflected slightly on his own laxity.
“If it's too lukewarm, shall I add more firewood?”
“It's neither too lukewarm nor too hot...”
“Then I can't tell.”
“It's just right.” The exorcist stretched her limbs slowly in the tub. Kneading her exhausted body naturally drew a contented sigh. Her disciple seemed to have noticed Onijuro's good mood as he indulged in this comfort.
“You're taking quite a long bath, aren't you?”
“...It's a fine bath. Occasionally indulging in luxury is rather nice, after all.”
“Shall I wash your back for you?”

In that instant... Onijuro flinched violently in the tub. Sensing the killing intent, Matashiro also took several steps back from the stove.
“M-Master... What is it...?”
“D-Do you intend to see your master naked?!”
“No, it's not out of any improper feelings...”
“Shut it! If you think I'll always see you as a child... when did you...?”
“W-what misunderstanding have you fallen into!”
But Onijuro slammed her fist hard against the wall, cutting off his disciple's protest.
"Listen well, Matashiro! While I may forgive you for being tempted by money, being tempted by a woman's charms is far more unforgivable! It's a grave sin!"
“Y-yes...”
“Women are nothing special! Keep that firmly in mind!”
“Yes, I will...”
“And certainly not my naked body... If you want a woman, I'll arrange one for you soon enough!”
“What?! I-is that truly so?” That voice... held a hint of joy. The moment she realized it, Onijuro flung the bucket of water out the lattice window.
“Wh-what are you doing, Master!”
“That sounded rather pleased, Matashiro...” A voice concealing quiet fury. Matashiro froze, soaked to the bone. “...Go back to your room. I'll be up shortly.”
“But Master...”
“It's been a while since I've squeezed you. I'll crush every last bit of your desires until not a trace remains. There will be no mercy in tonight's beating practice. Prepare yourself.”
“Ha, ha...” His reply was mixed with the sound of chattering teeth. His dejected footsteps eventually left the hearth.
(But Matashiro is right...)
Onijuro also thought she'd lingered too long in the bath. She hadn't realized how exhausted she was, how much she craved rest. She wanted to stay submerged in this water forever, to fall into a deep, unbroken sleep right here. Still, the exorcist climbed out of the tub, trying to regain her usual self.
But...
(This bath is too precious...)
(Just a little longer... just a bit more...)
Looking down at her own naked form, Onijuro let out a deep breath. Stripped of her travel gear, sword laid aside, the tension released, she was nothing more than a girl. The exorcist who constantly guarded against complacency, never showing weakness, had vanished somewhere. There stood the sixteen-year-old self Onijuro herself had forgotten.
“The bathhouse, huh...” The shadow creeping through the courtyard held its breath, lurking until the boy departed.
But this was a vast mansion. Only now did the shadow marvel, scratching its head. Finding the princess it sought would be no easy task. Disrupting the guarding

soldiers had been good, but naturally, vigilance had been heightened. Resigned, the shadow sighed quietly. “Well, I suppose I'll just have an appetizer first...”

Suddenly, Jakotsumaru grinned. Then, without a sound, he crept toward the lattice window of the bathhouse. He wasn't wearing his flashy daytime attire. He was clad in black robes that blended into the dark night. Reaching the chimney opening, he scanned the surroundings.

“Heh heh heh...” Crouching low, Jakotsumaru suppressed the smile at his lips. The voice coming from inside was unmistakably female. And terribly young. Biting back his excitement, Jakotsumaru steeled his resolve.

“Now then, Peeping Eye Worm...” With the silent command, the cursed spirit user gently spread his right hand. The eyeball already floating on his palm activated its third eye function. Jakotsumaru cautiously extended his palm between the bars.

Instantly...

(No way...!)

A scream of joy threatened to burst from his chest. But the sheer beauty of the sight made Jakotsumaru swiftly pull his hand back. His heart pounded, and unconsciously, both fists clenched.

(Could it be... the Princess bathing?!)

That thought flashed through his mind. But better safe than sorry. The cursed spirit user slid his right hand through the window lattice once more, this time intending to savor the sight slowly.

There, beauty stood.

Her naked form had likely just emerged from the bath. Her entire body still glowed crimson, droplets continuing to fall from her onto the washing area. The young, supple girl's back showed not a single flaw or blemish. Jakotsumaru wept at the sight of her rising form in the steam.

(I'm so glad I came here...!)

But the private viewing was not to last. The girl loosened the hair gathered atop her head. In an instant, her black hair cascaded down to her waist. The lustrous, freshly washed locks loosened Jakotsumaru's tear ducts. When he confirmed the curve from her narrow waist to her thighs, the cursed spirit user was overcome with emotion.

(I want to see her from the front!)

It was a simple desire. But he couldn't shift his viewpoint. There was only one window. Unless she turned toward him, she wouldn't look back.

Yet even from behind, she was a captivating girl. Humming a light tune, she carefully rinsed her black hair. Soon, she wrapped a rice bran bag in a towel and washed every inch of her perfectly proportioned body clean. A sacred, inviolable time for the girl. Jakotsumaru continued to gaze dreamily at her blissful back.

(She looks so happy... Does she really love bathing that much?)

Suddenly, his third eye blinked sharply. He looked again. And then... Jakotsumaru, awakening from his reverie, frowned grimly.

Amid the steam, the girl slowly took the white cloth in her hands and began folding it into a long, narrow strip. About shoulder-width long. She gripped both ends and suddenly...

(What the hell is this girl...!)

Scrub, scrub. The sound of her soft skin being rubbed reached outside. Powerful biceps bulged on the girl's arms as she vigorously scrubbed herself. But that wasn't all. Looking closer, her feet planted firmly in the washing area revealed well-defined muscles. In the disciplined rhythm of her scrubbing, Jakotsumaru felt he glimpsed the girl's true self.

(Seems she's not quite the princess I was after...)

(And besides... that build doesn't look like a girl's...)

Impressed, Jakotsumaru grinned.

(But this is beautiful in its own way. How to put it... a manly, healthy beauty, but...)

He couldn't help but snort. But that was his mistake.

“Matashiro!” Quickly, the girl let out a sharp cry. Covering her chest with both hands, she swiftly turned her upper body toward the window. Jakotsumaru hastily pulled his hands back, but it was too late.

“Who are you?!” The voice, strong and unmistakably not feminine, sensed the lecherous intent. Her angry shouts echoed not just through the bathhouse, but all the way to the garden.

“Someone's in the garden! Catch him!”

“...You gotta be kidding me!” With a thud, Jakotsumaru kicked off the ground and leaped into the bushes. But his figure was spotted by a group of soldiers who had rushed over. Immediately, a whistle sounded.

“A rogue! A rogue!”

“After him! Don't let him escape the grounds! Flank him!”

“Lights! Lights...!”

Chaos spread through the mansion in an instant. Yet Jakotsumaru's movements far outpaced the pursuers. From the thicket to the wall, from the wall to the main roof, he leapt back like a monkey. The cursed spirit user had vanished from the guards' sight in one swift move.

“Only noticing now? Not very impressive.” Crouching low, hidden on the roof, Jakotsumaru smiled faintly. The image of that naked back was still burned into his mind. That flushed, soft skin. Satisfied with his harvest, his cheeks relaxed naturally.

“Well, I should be heading back soon. Hōzōin-sama will be waking up... Time to make my exit...”

The moment he spoke...

“Who are you?” He was suddenly addressed. Startled, he spun around. On the roof, besides Jakotsumaru, another figure stood motionless.

“When did you get behind me?”

“I'm the one asking the questions. Answer me.”

“Ah. You were at the longhouse gate earlier, weren't you?”

“So that boy... was your doing...” As he spoke, Obata Kanbee drew his sword.

“That boy... he's not human. A cursed spirit, is he?”
“Indeed. He is a cursed spirit I command. Called Kenmon here. In Sōshū they call him Rashanpo. In Gunshū, he's known as a Kawa-gō...”
The night darkness loathed the gleam of steel. A first strike, precise to the point of meticulousness. Yet, Jakotsumaru's leap evaded it effortlessly. But another flash followed. Kanbee's sword aimed mercilessly for the cursed spirit user's chest.
However, floating lightly through the air, Jakotsumaru dodged, toyed with the blade's tip. Using the demon-faced roof tile as a foothold, the handsome intruder shrugged.
“You really are short-tempered. You'll never rise in rank.”
“If I take your head, I might receive a reward...”
“My head isn't worth that much, you know.”
“Step aside, Black Crane lackey!”.....?
Jakotsumaru tilted his head.
“What's this about a Black Crane?”
“Don't give me that! Playing dumb, are you?” Once more, Kanbee readied his sword in the Yatsusō stance. “It's obvious you're part of Black Crane's gang targeting the princess! Why don't you just give up quietly?”
Jakotsumaru gave a light nod. “So that's the plan? Huh...”
He said, lightly flicking his palm.
Simultaneously, Kanbee writhed in agony. A massive centipede had coiled around his body without him noticing. Its bulky torso glowed purple, its grip like a vise. With both arms pinned to his sides, Kanbee dropped his sword. “You bastard...!”
“That too is one of my bound cursed spirits. Its name is Centipede Monk. Quite cute, isn't he?” The cursed spirit brought its hideous face close to Hyoe's. Its gaping mouth stretched wide, revealing enormous fangs lining both sides - proof that it was no ordinary centipede.
“It will vanish shortly. Please wait a moment until I escape.”
“Damn it! This thing...”
“And I am not part of any group targeting the princess. Please be assured of that much.”
Leaving behind a sneer, it began to walk away. But when Jakotsumaru turned around, he froze instantly, halting his escape. For a moment, he didn't move a muscle. No, he couldn't move.
A sense of revulsion lingered there.
Clothed in the usual black travel garb, the opponent had already drawn their sword. Gaze fixed on Jakotsumaru, leaving not a single opening. Move, and he would be cut down. Realizing this, the Cursed Spirit User even retracted his smile.
But above all else...
(What the hell is this killing intent...?)
A relentlessly honed fighting spirit, sharp as a needle tip, pricked at Jakotsumaru's face. Instinctively, the cursed spirit user gritted his teeth. It was his usual habit when encountering an unpleasant opponent.
(Still, this feels awful...)
He voiced the revulsion in his heart without thinking.
“You're quite a hateful person, aren't you...”

“You’re... a man...?” The opponent noticed for the first time. But Jakotsumaru, too, finally realized it from that voice.

“And you’re… a woman...?”

“Don't you understand?! You're mocking me...!”

Jakotsumaru strained his eyes into the darkness. Realizing this, the figure edged forward. Light streaming through a break in the clouds faintly illuminated the face. The Cursed Spirit User recoiled in disbelief.

Wind made the freshly washed hair dance. Black hair bathed in blue moonlight gleamed with heightened luster, and the scent of medicinal baths rose from her entire body. The cursed spirit user was speechless.

“What's wrong? Do you recognize this face?” The girl held her blade in a proper stance. As Jakotsumaru panicked, the edge crept closer.

“But... I've been waiting for you. Black Crane's lackey!” Baring her fangs, the girl inched forward slowly.

On the great roof, Onijuro, facing the intruder, also felt her insides twist in agony.

He recognized her instantly—a detestable foe. Her very guts had warned him.

“What a disgustingly repulsive face. Makes me sick.”

“Well, well, what a rare sense of beauty you have...”

“You cursed me earlier too. Called me hateful...”

“Yes, I didn't realize it was you earlier...” Onijuro's eyes flashed.

“What do you mean?”

“N-no, nothing...”

“What are you doing here?”

“It's embarrassing to say...”

“What are you doing wearing women's makeup...”

“Hey now, you look like a man yourself.” For a moment... they glared at each other.

“Kizutani's Black Crane… you're one of his minions, aren't you?”

“No, I'm just a...”

“So you're a cursed spirit user...” In that instant, a blinding flash erupted.

From point-blank range, facing Jakotsumaru, Onijuro thrust her blade forward. It wasn't just a sword tip, it was the cutting edge of lightning, wrapped in a cursed spirit's electric shock.

“Waaah!” By a hair's breadth, Jakotsumaru leapt backward. The scream was genuine. His shoulders rose and fell wildly, betraying his profound terror and relief at escaping.

But though she had let Jakotsumaru slip away, Onijuro was already rushing toward the captured Kanbee. With a single sweep of her sword, she swiftly struck the centipede. The exorcist's fighting spirit sent it flying onto the large roof.

“Exorcism, retreat!”Onijūrō's sword cleaved the centipede monk's torso.

Like mist dispersing, the cursed spirit's flesh slipped away, vanishing into the air. Kanbee knelt on the roof.

“Forgive me, Onijūrō-sama!”

“It’s fine. The real problem is that bastard...”

The two stood shoulder to shoulder, blades aligned. Their gaze fixed on Jakotsumaru. Yet the intruder nodded, his carefree demeanor unshaken.

“You... are Onijuro-sama...”

“What of it?”

“Nothing. I've heard of you. You are... Onijuro of the Aoi clan, the exorcist, correct?”

Jakotsumaru exhaled deeply. Kanbee closed the distance, his expression calm.

“So what? Scared?”

“No, I was surprised. That such a creature as an exorcist still exists on this continent...”

“Seems you dislike them, exorcists...?” Jakotsumaru nodded at Onijuro's question.
“Yes. They're the most... the most despicable beings in this world.”
“You've got to be joking...!”
“But Onijuro-sama must feel the same way...” Jakotsumaru forced a bitter smile.
“You despise those who wield cursed spirits, don't you?”
“Of course. We are mutually incompatible beings... those who wield cursed spirits, and those who slay them.” Onijuro's sword was once again held in a proper stance.
“We are ancient enemies, are we not...”
“But I thought they had been eradicated.”
“As long as wicked cursed spirits exist, the lineage of exorcism shall never cease...”
“Not all cursed spirits are evil. Many can live alongside humans.”
“That matters not...” The exorcist's sword clanged. “I merely slay the enemies I've been hired to kill. Scum like you...”
"But... I am not your enemy. You mentioned Kurotsuru earlier..."
“Then why did you sneak in?!”
“I cannot speak of it to others... it is due to deep circumstances.”
“I don't believe you...!” Suddenly, commotion began beneath the roof. Only now noticing the confrontation on the rooftop, soldiers were desperately trying to rush over. Looking down at the chaos below, the cursed spirit user shrugged.
“It's getting rather noisy down there. I'll come back another time.”
“You're running away?!”
“Of course. But I have other targets... Besides, with an exorcist here, I have no choice but to return later.”
“Speak! The princess is your target, isn't it?!”
“Perhaps.” The handsome figure returned a smile to Aoi's interrogation.
“My name is Jakotsumaru. Until we meet again.”
“Hey, wait!”
“I am not your enemy. Please remember that above all else...”
With that, the cursed spirit user vanished. As if nothing, no one, had ever been there...
“Onijuro-dono, that bastard...” Ignoring the commotion rising from below, Kanbee said. But the exorcist was quietly sheathing his sword.
“He... dodged my strike...” Gritting her teeth, the girl declared. “But there won't be a next time. Next time, I will definitely... cut him down.”
“Onijuro-sama...”
Onijuro swore it, her face that of a samurai.

【Chapter 2】

“What did you say?”
His eyes widened in surprise. Masuda Uemon Nagamori kept rubbing his sleepy eyes.
“You... what did you just say?”
“I said I wish to depart this post town before dawn breaks.” Obata Kanbee emphasized his words. In the middle of the night, over a dozen samurai sat knee to knee in the room. Kanbee glared at them all with his pale, gleaming eyes.
“Depart... you mean the procession?”
“Indeed. Immediately...!” In Nagamori's chamber, Kanbee nodded. But the old retainer, a hereditary vassal, screamed and shook his white topknot wildly.
“What on earth happened?! I understand nothing! Explain everything in detail!”
“It is the enemy.” Quietly... Onijuro stated it plainly. The exorcist following behind Kanbee surveyed the group and slowly began to speak. “Without doubt, an agent of Kurotsuru. A cursed spirit user have just infiltrated the main residence.”
“What?! Then... then Lady Chizuru...”
“Rest assured, Lord Senior Retainer. The enemy fled immediately. Lady Chizuru's private quarters remain undisturbed.”
A sigh of relief escaped them. But without pause, Kanbee's voice rang out.
“But now that the enemy has finally moved, we cannot afford to continue this procession at a snail's pace!”
“So... you mean we should depart immediately?”
“Precisely! Fifty ri remain to the capital of Sanyo Province! If we push the procession forward relentlessly, day and night without pause, we will surely reach it in four days...”
“Wait! Wait! Wait!”
“The Black Crane of Kizu can only wield its cursed spirit power... only by drawing spiritual energy from the sacred springs of Unshu! Therefore, the decisive battle must be fought at the border!”
Still seated, Kanbee thrust his knees forward. The exorcist's gaze was fixed, unwavering, on Nagamori. “Lord Senior Retainer... Your decision...”
“Enough of this nonsense, you fools!” Masuda Nagamori forcibly cut off the pleas.
“The governor's procession is strictly limited to six ri per day! Fifty ri in four days is sheer madness!”
“This procession is an exception!” Kanbee shouted back defiantly. “The established rules are shackles in this situation! If you truly wish for the princess's safety above all else, fleeing swiftly is the best strategy!”
“Flee? What nonsense! Flee? Are you suggesting Lady Chizuru should flee in the dead of night?!”
“If it means victory, then what's wrong with that?!”
“Fearing the cursed spirit's threats, the bride from Unshu fled to Sanyo... That's how the world will see it! That's how they'll laugh!” At the old retainers' voices... Kanbee's back teeth ground together. Even the enraged Nagamori fell silent for a moment. Still, Kanbee bowed his head deeply once more.

“My lord, I beg you, I beg you...!”
“...The departure remains as decided, at dawn tomorrow.” His tone was cold. Nagamori's gaze fixed intently on Onijuro's face “We shall meet them head-on and enter Sanyu with dignity. This is the direct command of His Lordship the Daimyo himself.”
“That is why you were hired. You will protect Lady Chizuru splendidly, won't you?”
One of the magistrates pointed at the silent exorcist with the tip of his folding fan. But Onijuro showed no sign of displeasure, merely continuing to keep her eyes closed in quiet resolve. “Of course... That is why I am here. Even knowing the odds are against us, if it is my lord's request, I have no choice. Rest assured, I will handle everything.”
The lantern was extinguished, and the sliding door closed at the hands of the retainer. Only Kanbee's bitter sorrow remained, lingering alone in the room.

Left behind in the darkness, the two sighed. “My apologies... Onijuro-dono.”
“There is nothing for you to apologize for, Kanbee.” Speaking, Onijuro expressed her indignation through a sigh. “Every country, every house has its stubborn fools. It's hardly unusual. Besides... they say fools are as plentiful as sand. Don't trouble yourself.”
“The senior retainer frankly finds you troublesome.” In a resigned tone, Kanbee stated calmly. “The proposal to hire you was His Excellency the Governor's own idea, and I wholeheartedly agreed... but—”
“Well... I suppose I understood that much.” Interrupting, Onijuro laid bare her own thoughts. "To rely on someone outside the household... is hardly something a hereditary retainer can easily do..."
“But I believe in you!” Kanbee stared straight at Onijuro. “It is only because we have you, Onijuro-dono, the foremost exorcist on the continent, that everyone feels at ease. Please, do not abandon us now, at this final moment...”
Onijuro remained silent, meeting Kanbee's gaze. The young samurai, still unable to contain his excitement, was breathing heavily. His agitation had transformed this spirited, handsome youth into a demonic visage.
“You are concerned... about Lady Chizuru...”
“Of course! She is the most important person of all!” Kanbee delivered his earnest words without the slightest pretense. For the first time, Onijuro felt she truly understood this young man, Obata Kanbee. “If only the senior retainer possessed such spirit... But that is impossible.”
“Why is that? Even the senior retainer is of the Sakakibara family...” No, no, Onijuro smiled. “From what I've seen, there's no one with spirit like yours, Kanbee-dono. Enough to stand up to those senior officials... Someone who cherishes Lady Chizuru so deeply...”
“N-no, I'm not saying that!” He stopped mid-sentence, speechless. Onijuro smiled at Kanbee, who hastily wiped the sweat from his neck.
(Honest... truly, an honest man.)
Love should be something Onijuro would never know in his lifetime. Knowing this, yet... a faint feeling of envy welled up within her heart.

(Kanbee-dono... He holds such single-minded devotion for Lady Chizuru... Even testing me in the rain... was it because of that devotion...)

Onijuro bowed her head slowly. "I shall not disregard those feelings of yours. And as long as you're here, Kanbee-dono... I shall never abandon this wedding procession"

Kanbee's hopes rested upon Onijuro's shoulders. He could not fail to respond to such sincere devotion.

"Departure!"

The signal cry pierced the morning mist. Led by the mounted Kanbee Obata, the wedding procession slid out onto the highway.

"Did you sleep well last night, Matashiro?"

"N-no, not at all..."

Master and disciple were also on horseback. In the center of the procession, the two riders kept their bridles side by side, directly behind Chizuru's palanquin. The master grinned at Matashiro's unsteady handling of the reins.

"You haven't forgotten, have you? That business with your desires... Last night we were interrupted, but tonight will be different. Look forward to your sparring practice."

As Matashiro hung his head dejectedly, Onijuro whispered further.

"...Go to the rear of the procession." A sudden, calm command.

"Why, Master?"

"If anyone follows, let me know. I doubt they'd be so bold as to... but... that spirit user last night seemed strangely confident. It bothers me."

"Y-Yes, understood...!"

Turning his horse's head, Matashiro scanned his surroundings. But the early morning road was still sparsely populated. Regardless, the boy urged his horse toward the rear of the procession.

That's it... I'm concerned. Strangely... I'm concerned about him - Onijuro thought to herself. The last night's cursed spirit user… Just dodging Onijuro's single strike meant his skill must be considerable.

(There is still someone who can dodge my blade...)

She couldn't hide her surprise - but what truly bothered Onijuro wasn't just skill.

(That disgusting look in his eyes... that aura... just one glance... made me sick to my stomach.)

She'd never encountered an enemy like that before. Enemies were always fought with sword and cursed spirits, always defeated by Onijuro. To dodge a strike, flee, and then deliver a taunt—it was an unforgivable insult.

(He said something about "Jako Tsumaru"... that bastard...)

Where would they meet next? Imagining that scene, Onijuro urged her horse forward. The rising sun finally began to dispel the morning mist. It was a perfect day for a procession along the highway.

“Are you still angry, Hōzōin-sama?” A terrible bruise outlined Jakotsumaru's right eye. The two pilgrims held their breath, watching the highway from the mountain ridge above. Still, Hōzōin clutched her pounding head and gritted her teeth.

“Of course I am... Ugh! I've fallen for sake because of you again...!”

“You're as simple-minded as ever...”

“If it weren't for this hangover, I'd punch out your left eye too, Jakotsumaru! Ugh!”

"A woman of a thousand pints... That's you, Hōzōin-sama. Perhaps you should hold back a little more..."

Instead of a reply, a Kongobō staff flew through the air - but this morning, Jakotsumaru was in peak physical and mental condition. He easily dodged the blow and strained his eyes toward the procession leaving the highway.

“Hōzōin-sama, it's time for us to depart as well.”

“You're serious about this, Jakotsumaru?”

“Of course.” Chest puffed out, the cursed spirit user snorted defiantly. “Last night, I sneaked in all that trouble, yet I didn't even catch a glimpse of the princess I came for! If I give up now, my manhood will be ruined!”

“It's already ruined. Long ago.”

“Ah, I long to see her... Just what kind of beautiful princess rides in that palanquin...?”

“If she's truly a beauty, she'd surely faint at the sight of you...”

“Black hair swaying in the autumn breeze... Jewel-like eyes, luscious lips... And legs as slender as rice stalks...”

“Dreaming again...”

“The fresh radiance of a girl on the cusp of womanhood, youthful beauty... Hmm, it's overwhelming.”

But Hōzōin raised her six-foot Kongō staff toward the sky, pointing its tip toward the center of the procession.

“I only permitted the pursuit because there is an exorcist among them! Do not forget that!”

“How practical of you, Hōzōin-sama...”

“Of course! Hearing that Aoi Onijuro is present, I cannot simply stand by and watch!”

Clunk. Hōzōin thrust her staff into the ground. “How many useful cursed spirits have been killed thanks to those exorcists! And all because of those ignorant, savage... exorcists who seek to kill any cursed spirit they see!”

Getting to the point, Hōzōin pressed forward toward Jakotsumaru, her breath reeking of sake. “With that exorcist right before your eyes, how can you, a user of cursed spirits, not be furious! For us, cursed spirits are friends, sacred beings who lend their power to humans! And you... you... know shame! Shame!”

“Hahaha...”

"That's why... we're following that procession! It's not about the princess! It's about Aoi Onijuro, called the foremost exorcist of the land... She must be involved in some scheme related to the Cursed Gods... HShe must be. We cannot rule out the possibility of slaying a worthless cursed spirit. To ascertain what lies there... that is why I said we must follow her!"

Indeed...

Jakotsumaru was also troubled. Last night's exorcist. The sword strokes that effortlessly cut down the centipede demon and the blinding speed of the blade that struck at Jakotsumaru…

(She's no ordinary swordsman...)

It even inspired fear. But what truly troubled Jakotsumaru wasn't just her skill. That hateful glare... that aura. She would have been perfect if she'd got rid of it, but somehow... just one glance... anger welled up inside her.

He'd never encountered an exorcist like that before. Exorcists were always supposed to be those petty bastards who flaunted their cursed spirit powers, tormenting useless cursed gods for money. But he'd never seen one so skilled, yet so thoroughly twisted to the core.

(Aoi Onijuro... huh?)

Where would they meet again? He'd make sure their reunion twisted that crooked face into shock. The face of Jakotsumaru he imagined was naturally smirking. The roadside where the two pilgrims waited was bathed in the gentle warmth of a clear autumn day.

Onijuro's horse climbed to the top of the embankment. Suddenly, the view opened up. Vast fertile fields stretched out, covered entirely in reeds. The brown reed fields swayed in the wind, murmuring like waves.

Two great rivers crossed this open expanse. The Oura River lay near, while the Sakezuma River stretched into the distance.

“Fine weather...” The wedding procession slowly crossed the embankment. Onijuro watched for a while as the palanquin ahead of her, carrying Masuda Nagamori, proceeded alongside the province's greatest river.

The lead carriage descended to the riverbank. Kanbee, who had gone ahead, turned back toward that carriage. Noticing the movement, Onijuro finally began urging his horse forward. “Kanbee, how's the crossing point?”

"No ambushes or traps of any kind! Lookouts have returned from the opposite bank of the Oura River too! For now, this spot should be safe..."

Nagamori nodded deeply at the report.

“That's all we need. If we hand over all the hand signals at once, we'll be attacked on the immobile boats without any surplus forces...” Nagamori raised his command staff high. “Takeuchi Hikoshiro, lead the spearmen across first! Form a defensive line on the opposite shore and await the palanquin!”

With a rustling sound, the soldiers moved in response to the order.

“Obata Kanbee, take the cursed foot soldiers with the exorcist and attach them to the palanquin! Hioki Motonoshin, lead the cavalry and wait at the crossing point!”

Nagamori divided the fifty armed men into three units. First, secure the opposite shore and ferry the palanquin by boat. If anything happens, the cavalry waiting on this shore will rush to the rescue.

“Standard procedure... solid.”

Onijūrō felt neither praise nor disappointment. Nagamori wasn't incompetent. But...

(...it's far too few)

Gazing at the scattered troops, Onijūrō sighed. Even though it was a wedding procession, it was still a military convoy entering another province. The province of Sanyū had strictly limited the number of escort guards. That was why there were only fifty. Even so, if the Black Crane of Kizu attacked, even ten thousand troops might not be enough to defend against it.

(That's why... I'm here.) Only now did Onijuro fully grasp her role. To accompany the palanquin, the exorcist spurred her horse forward.

“Oh, Onijuro-dono, have you noticed something?”

“No... nothing in particular...” Onijuro rode her horse alongside Kanbee.

“On a day like this, even an exorcist's power might dull. Such clear autumn skies leave one wide open.”

“But you're not letting your guard down, are you?”

“Of course not. If I did, they'd surely exploit it.” For a moment, the two exchanged smiles from their saddles.

When their gazes met the palanquin... “What do you think, Onijuro-dono?”

“Think what?”

“About Lady Chizuru...” Though she understood, the exorcist feigned ignorance.

“She is a beautiful princess...”

“Is that all?”

“Is that not enough...?” But repeating the act of feigning ignorance felt awkward. Reluctantly, Onijuro sighed in resignation “No, to be honest... she is too beautiful.”

“.....”

“But is that beauty truly hers, or is it the power of the charm stone...”

“That is indeed a valid concern.....” Kanbee nodded in agreement. In that profile, Onijuro suddenly sensed a dignified presence.

This young warrior would not look out of place standing beside that princess.

“Kanbee-dono, I hear you have served the princess since childhood?”

The spearmen crossed the river. Watching them, Obata Kanbee lowered his eyes slightly.

"I am not of the warrior class. My parents died in battle... I was the son of a peasant... I was taken in and became a foot soldier. To be honest, one like me is far too lowly to guard the princess here like this..."

“But you’re the squad leader of the Cursed Spirit Foot Soldiers...”

Onijuro surveyed the young samurai's subordinates.

"The Cursed Spirit Foot Soldiers are, in essence, half-Cursed Gods... those born between Cursed Spirits and humans. They are shunned in the human world and cannot find their place in the cursed spirits' world either."

“Indeed... Though Unshū Province holds 2.4 million koku and maintains 60,000 soldiers, the Cursed Spirit Foot Soldiers number only fifty-odd... I was chosen as leader despite my lowly status, though I am human.”

Having said this much, Kanbee exhaled heavily through his shoulders.

“We who live by the code of living in darkness and dying in darkness... but when the enemy is a cursed spirit, it's different. For a human without cursed power cannot cleave the body of a cursed spirit...”

“And so, your squad, skilled in manipulating cursed spirits, was selected to guard the princess, and I, too, was also assigned.”

Kanbee nodded, his gaze fixed on Onijūrō. His eyes were filled with solitude. It was a calm, almost sorrowful look, unrecognizable from the man who had raged the night before.

(To hear the one you love is marrying into another country... What must that feel like for a man...?) Especially if that person was utterly out of reach. Before she could even find the right words, Onijuro reached out to lightly touch Kanbee's shoulder.

At that moment...

“Master!” The sudden voice made Onijuro expression change completely.

“Matashirō, what is it? Has something happened?”

“I'm here!” Rushing from the rear of the procession, the boy gasped for breath atop his horse.

“The man matching the description you gave, Master! There's no mistake! He's been following behind the procession the whole time...”

“Could it be last night's...!”

“Are you certain, Matashiro? A disgusting, foolish-looking man in full make-up, right?”

“That's not what you said earlier! You said he was a spineless fool, like some third-rate, unsuccessful onnagata wearing thick, flashy makeup at his age!”

“It doesn't matter! Is he secretly following us?”

“No, not at all.”

Furrowing his brow, Onijuro bared her fangs.

“Then why did you come to report? You found him, but you're not following him?”

“I am following him! Right on his tail!”

“What? What do you mean?”

“Don't you get it... I'm following right behind the procession! The dignified man is behind it!”

Hearing her disciple's report, Onijuro's hands trembled violently on the reins. Rage began erupting from every pore in her body. A voice like a crackling thunder was squeezed from the depths of her throat.

“...Dignified... Did you say dignified?”

“Y-yes, Master...” Sensing the seeping fury, Matashiro flinched, horse and all. But it was too late. The demon-slayer atop her steed let out a roar, a beastly bellow.

“...Don't you dare underestimate me!”

“I-It wasn't me, Master!”

“Shut up! I never thought it possible, but ‘dignified’? I won't tolerate it! This is blatant provocation! You're underestimating my power! You ridiculous cursed spirit user!”

“Y-Yes, you're absolutely right...”

Receiving the angry shout, Matashiro retreated further. But Onijuro fixed the boy with a piercing stare. “Has he caught up yet?”

“No, his pace is slow. It should take him a quarter of an hour to reach this crossing.”

“Alone?”

“No... there were two of them.”

Onijuro's anger faltered for an instant. “Two of them?”

“Yes, with him a nun. She appeared to be in her mid-thirties. Unlike the man, she seemed to be a woman of some dignity.” Matashiro was deliberately calm in his assessment, but Onijuro couldn't help but frown at his keen observation.

“What?! Mid-thirties? Since when can you tell a woman's age?”

“Well... it's a man's intuition...”

“Don't talk back...” With that, Onijuro went limp. Her anger hadn't subsided, but the situation had changed. “They're a despicable bunch, but for now, speeding our journey is first priority. I shall accompany the princess's palanquin. Matashiro, turn back. The exorcist will remain at the rear of the procession as planned, continuing surveillance. Should anything occur... signal urgency with fireworks.”

"That is the best course. The enemy may not be limited to just two. Onijūrō-dono must absolutely remain with the palanquin..."

Kanbee was about to continue when... his gaze suddenly snapped backward. Masuda Nagamori, mounted on horseback, was rapidly approaching with the magistrates in tow.

“Kanbee, what are you doing? Hurry and take your place with the palanquin! Onijūrō-san, you too, quickly!”

“I'm coming now, Lord Senior Retainer. It seems some unscrupulous fellows are disrupting the procession.” Onijuro remained composed and calm, but Nagamori and his men suddenly stiffened.

“Unscrupulous fellows? Who are they?”

“Most likely... the thieves who infiltrated Lord Meidai’s residence last night. They are likely those mysterious cursed spirit users.”

Onijuro stated matter-of-factly. Yet the magistrates all visibly panicked.

“Cursed spirit users... then it must be Kurotsuru's faction...!”

“No, that remains unconfirmed!”

“We must verify... no, drive them away!”

(What utter nonsense...)

Onijuro openly wore a sneer. Merely informed of two pursuers, the Sakakibara family's veteran retainers had all begun to fluster. This was not the conduct befitting responsible warriors of a great province.

“There is no need for concern. Me and Kanbee-dono are guarding the palanquin. No matter how many cursed spirits attack, they should not be able to approach the palanquin easily. I think it would be best not to worry needlessly...?”

To calm their agitation, Onijuro deliberately adopted a magnanimous tone. But Nagamori, still on horseback, flushed crimson across his round face.

“That may be so, Onijuro! But to assume they are easy prey is rash! You cannot possibly know every cursed spirit they might employ!”

“That is true, but...”

“Then leave the palanquin's guard to Kanbee! Why not deal swiftly with these insolent scoundrels yourself? It's also a good chance to gauge the enemy's strength! Engage them here!”

“Bu-but...” Before Matashiro could protest, Kanbee reflexively flew into a rage.

“You wish Onijuro-dono to leave the palanquin? That would be playing right into the enemy's hands! It would give Kurotsuru's men an opening to strike!”
“Rather than guarding against an enemy whose whereabouts are unknown, we strike the enemy who has revealed himself!”
“Onijuro-dono can easily defeat the enemy's vanguard! We must show them our strength!”
“Precisely! Or are you saying, Kanbee, you lack the confidence to protect the Princess with just your own squad, you bastard?!”
“What are you implying?!” A distinct blue vein stood out on Kanbee's pale nape. His fists trembled as if ready to tear the reins apart.
But Onijuro...
(...What a tiresome bunch.)
Onijuro's sound reasoning wouldn't reach magistrates possessed by fear. She had no energy to argue with these incompetent old men anyway. She understood Kanbee's frustration, but now was no time for quarrels. “Understood. I shall go.”
“Master!”
“But Onijūrō...!” Stunned, the young warrior turned his horse around. But the exorcist gently stroked Kanbee's hand as she looked back.
“Nagamori-san holds the reins of the procession. The wedding procession has only just begun... It would be unwise to disrupt the command here.”
“Well said, Onijuro! So you will obey my command?”
“Of course. But I ask you to take this to heart...” Onijuro straightened his back and glared at the assembled elder vassals of Unshu. "While I am away from the palanquin... be utterly vigilant. Should the enemy attack, inform me immediately. And should you encounter the enemy... entrust full authority to Kanbee-dono... leave the command to him. Is that understood?"
Her piercing gaze swept over them, allowing no hint of compromise. For the first time, Nagamori and the others realized the existence of an ally more terrifying than the enemy itself.
“Understood. In any case, Onijuro-san... I entrust the matter of these unruly scoundrels to you!” With that trembling statement, Nagamori and his men fled the scene. Only Kanbee remained, glaring at Onijuro with an unconvinced gaze.
“Why did you just submit to him...!”
For a moment, the exorcist gave no reply. Suddenly, she glanced at the simple rest hut adjacent to the ferry landing and listened to the birdsong. Inside the bamboo-curtained pavilion, people waiting for boats chatted and laughed. The wedding procession had crossed, and they were waiting for their own boat.
"...I am an exorcist. Indeed, I have my own way of doing things. But... My master, Bokuden, always said: Even if forced to adopt another's methods, even under any constraints or restrictions, one must flawlessly accomplish the exorcism. Only by achieving that... one can be called a first-rate exorcist."
“.....”
"I wish to be a first-rate exorcist. Even if the best conditions aren't met..... I will protect Lady Chizuru splendidly." Having said this, Onijuro also gave Matsushiro

a look. Taking his master's words to heart, the boy silently nodded. There was no longer any need for restraint; they were master and disciple.

Kanbee turned back to the procession and, in his frustration, struck his saddle bag.

“...If only those magistrates were a bit more reasonable...!”

“Don't trouble yourself. No amount of reasoning will reach that faction. More importantly, Kanbee-dono...” Suddenly, Onijuro grabbed the young warrior by the collar. Kanbee's expression stiffened in surprise. But Onijuro stared straight into his eyes, unflinching.

“You are the only samurai I have faith in, Kanbee. Regarding Lady Chizuru... please...”

“...Understood. Leave it to me.” Watching Kanbee run off, Onijuro let out a deep sigh.

“Then we too shall cross ahead.”

“What of those men? Shall we not deal with them?”

To her disciple's question, Onijuro gestured toward the surrounding area. “The visibility here is too good. We shall cross first and intercept them... on the sandbar between the Oura River and the Sakematsu River.”

“But it will take them quite some time to cross?”

“That's fine. It buys us time. By then, the procession will have crossed the Sakematsu River, and I can secure Takamagahara.”

“So... we really are ambushing them?” The boy looked up at the exorcist. Matashiro's voice, pressing for confirmation, clearly held hesitation. Onijuro glared at her disciple with a puzzled look.

“What is it? What's bothering you?”

“But... she's a nun, right?”

“What's wrong with a nun?”

“Is it really okay to drag a woman who serves the Twelve Heavenly Gods into Takamagahara?”

"It matters not. Man or woman... priestess or monk... there is no mercy for those who target the procession. Cut them down."

“Won't we be struck by divine retribution...?”

Onijuro snorted ostentatiously. “That nun... she was beautiful, wasn't she?”

“Well... I couldn't see her face, what with the hood...”

“That's enough. Even if she's in her mid-thirties... she's the sort of woman you'd hesitate to kill, isn't she?”

Matashiro couldn't reply. He kept up his forced smile and pulled his horse back another step. But the exorcist merely nodded and turned his horse around.

“Understood. If you don't like it, I'll kill them both myself. You wait outside Takamagahara.”

“Is that really okay?”

“Don't look relieved. Women like that are the ones who use unexpected cursed spirits. Keep that in mind.” With that, Onijuro spurred her horse toward the ferry crossing. Matashiro hurriedly followed.

From somewhere on the mountainside came the sound of straw mats being laid. It was a gentle, mountain village sound, entirely out of place with the bloody intrigue.

The boat crossed the Oura River well past noon. Though the sunlight still held summer warmth, the breeze across the reed fields was cool and pleasant. Stepping onto the crude pier, Hōzōin relaxed her face in the wind. “Isn't this a fine breeze, Jakotsumaru?”

“Enough! Just help me already...” A pitiful voice pleaded as travelers disembarked one after another. The cursed spirit user, trembling, finally stepped onto the shore.

“What a helpless sight...”

“Yes, yes, whatever. Why on earth doesn't anyone fuss about the rocking...?”

Whispering softly, Jakotsumaru glanced back at the opposite shore. The ferry slowly made its way back across the Oura River. Looking back, the travelers who had reached the long sandbar between the Tsumega and Oura Rivers were hurrying ahead. Everyone wanted to cross the next river, the Saketsuma River, and reach the castle town of Saginohara before nightfall.

"Hōzōin-sama, the wedding procession is no longer in sight. They must be in a hurry..."

“Yet the road is but one. They crossed the Sakematsu River and should enter the castle town of Saginohara tonight. We know their lodgings. Pursuing them will be easy enough.”

From the Oura River crossing to the Sakematsu River, the line of people stretched along a narrow path cutting through the reed beds. Reeds taller than a man's height grew thickly on both sides of the narrow path, blocking the view. Though the distance was less than a chō, Jakotsumaru felt a prickling sensation piercing his spine.

“What's the matter? Why are you so restless...”

“Can't you feel it, Hozoin-sama? I have this feeling... someone is watching us...”

“You're always so self-conscious. Though with your appearance, it's no wonder everyone looks at you suspiciously...” The nun, staff in hand, pressed forward. Yet the cursed spirit user distinctly sensed a gaze filled with murderous intent.

(Just in case... Should I let one slip by...)

Jakotsumaru slipped his hand into his robe. Beneath the ornate sleeve lining, several crystal orbs were wrapped around his slender upper arm. Pierced with holes and strung together like prayer beads, these orbs contained the sealed cursed spirits he commanded.

At that very instant...

While walking and searching through the beads, Jakotsumaru hesitated over which scout to choose.

“Huh...?” A sound escaped him involuntarily. His feet abruptly stopped. But so did Hōzōin's. They sensed the anomaly simultaneously and locked eyes. Both stiffened instantly, feeling damp air rush into their ears.

And around them...

The anomaly manifested. It seemed sudden. The clear autumn sky vanished, and the surroundings were instantly enveloped in darkness. No, not true darkness. The darkness surrounding the sandbar flickered with countless stars. The reed field was suddenly engulfed in starlight.

Furthermore, every single figure walking ahead of or behind them had vanished without a trace. All that remained were the starry sky and reeds swaying in the wind. Standing there were Jakotsumaru and Hōzōin. A silence for two alone.

“What the hell is this...” Jakotsumaru gazed up at the suddenly revealed star-filled night sky and let out a gasp of wonder. However, Hōzōin pressed her lips into a straight line and remained frozen for a moment.

“This is bad...” She muttered, then abruptly readied her Kongō staff at her waist and scanned the surroundings.

“Wh-what's bad, Hōzōin-sama?”

“You don't understand? The sheer volume of spiritual energy filling this sealed space... The power of cursed energy...”
“This... is it a cursed spirit?”
“A cursed spirit indeed... Judging by the scale of the spiritual energy deployed... It's likely a first-class secret technique cursed spirit...”
“Then...!” Jakotsumaru, flustered, groped at the row of crystal balls. But shaking her head, Hōzōin declared.
“It's useless, Jakotsumartu. If this is that exorcist's cursed spirit, then we've been dragged onto her turf...”
“You mean Takamagahara...!”
“That's exactly what I mean...”
Nodding, Hōzōin leapt into the air. Curling into a ball, she swung her Kongō staff in a flash. Instantly, a shrill metallic clang echoed.
“Hōzōin-sama!”
The nun landed before Jakotsumaru's outcry.
But simultaneously, another shadow descended from the starry sky. A sword that had parried the staff's blow glinted sharply in the darkness. With reeds at his back, the figure in black adjusted his stance.
“Step back, Jakotsumaru...”
“.....” Appearing, Aoi Onijuro fixed her blade's point on both of them. Her gaze sharply captured the cursed spirit user. Her eyes held the same anger as last night.
“This is a continuation of yesterday. I waited for this. Waited too long... I'm a bit tired.”
It was a blade now impossible to evade, impossible to dodge.

The water's surface was a calm, wave-less flow. Standing at the crossing point of the Sakezuma River, Obata Kanbee scanned his surroundings. Only the chirping of waterfowl echoed across the autumn-clear riverbed. Confirming safety, Kanbee silently signaled to Masuda Nagamori. In response, the old retainer gave the command.
“Hoist the palanquin!” Hearing the shout, the palanquin bearers cautiously began lifting the vessel onto the boat. Simultaneously, a detachment under Kanbee's command boarded small boats in groups of four or five. Using the spearmen waiting on the opposite bank as their guide, the crossing of the Sakematsu River began.
Kanbee also leapt nimbly onto the boat carrying the palanquin. Meeting Kanbee's gaze, Nagamori, standing at the bow, quietly beckoned the young warrior closer.
“Is something wrong, Nagamori-sama...?”
“No, I believe all is well. The letter from Kurotsuru stated the entire clan would attack... Frankly, I'm relieved.”
“That's good news. Besides, the procession won't enter Sanzu for another eight days. We can't afford to let our guard down yet... But what is it?”
“Hmm,” Nagamori replied, forcing the words out. “In that case... perhaps there's no need to keep her employed... eh?”
“Nonsense! Do you mean Onijuro-san?!” Kanbee's fury caused the boat to lurch violently. Nagamori hurriedly calmed the trembling young warrior.

“I know what you mean... but... the retainer fee is a thousand ryo! Even if it is a direct order from His Lordship himself...”

“The governor surely knows about the retainer fee! There's no need for us to worry!”

“But still...” Nagamori pursed his lips, about to voice his discontent. For Nagamori, who also served as the Gold Mine Commissioner and Auditor, spending a thousand ryo must have been painful. But Kanbee changed his tone, addressing the old retainer's bowed back.

“If we remove Onijuro-san from the procession now, and then allow Kurotsuru to seize the princess... could you bear the blame, Lord Senior Advisor?”

“Th-that...”

“Indeed. It would become an utterly inexcusable matter. Is that truly acceptable to you?”

“Kanbee, you... you're threatening me?!” Shouting softly, Nagamori hastily fled to the stern. Smiling, Kanbee also sat down on the gunwale. The two sat apart, gazing at the scenery for a while.

In the blue sky, a flock of waterfowl drifted. On the smooth water surface, only the wake of a ferry rippled. It was an early autumn afternoon, so peaceful it felt unreal.

“Well, perhaps there's no need to worry...”

Nagamori murmured, trying to dismiss his premature anxiety, when suddenly...

Suddenly, Kanbee vanished from the bow. “Kan...!”

Nagamori's voice froze mid-word. A sudden, loud splash. Then spray. There was no scream. But there was no doubt. Kanbee had been dragged underwater...

“Bring the boat closer—!” Reflexively, Nagamori shouted and reached for his sword. The nearby boatmen, then the soldiers, all stared wide-eyed at the palanquin boat.

The water surface, which had been perfectly still just moments ago, suddenly erupted into bubbles. Multiple bubbles. Then, around the ferry carrying the palanquin, a swarm of water spouts surged upward. Nagamori looked up at the towering spout above him and boldly drew his sword.

“A... cursed spirit...!” The old general's voice trembled with fear from the depths of his being. Yet the monstrous beings descended onto the deck with arrogant ease, as if mocking Nagamori. The hideous assassins revealed their forms for the very first time...

Onijūrō pressed the tip of her blade firmly against Jakotsumaru. Simultaneously, she glared sharply at the cursed spirit user with needle-like eyes. A malevolent rage erupted from her entire body. “How dare you come here so brazenly with your procession! You take your mockery too far!”

“No, I'm not mocking you at all...”

“Shut up!! I'll cut you down!!” Dozens of phosphorescent lights rose from the surrounding reeds. Floating unsteadily, they gradually formed a formation encircling Jakotsumaru and Hōzōin. The exorcist's barrier was complete.

Jakotsumaru grimaced with a weary sigh.

“You went to all this trouble to set up a barrier and ambush us? Just for us...?”

“We cannot stand idly by while those who target the princess's procession... remain unchecked...”

“But I told you, we're not your enemies. I understand your feelings, Exorcist-sama, that you despise cursed spirit users...”

Onijuro's mouth twisted into a sneer. Shuffling her feet to adjust her stance, the exorcist closed the distance. “No fool would declare themselves an enemy!”

“So you think we're lying?”

“Yes, that's how it looks!”

“You think everyone's a thief, do you?”

“You're the one who snuck in! You're the one at fault!”

“Well, yes...” Suddenly, the nun spoke up. Then, as if it were nothing, she stepped forward in front of Onijuro. Her calm demeanor made the exorcist frown.

“And you are?”

“Hōzōin. I am Jakotsumaru's foster parent and guardian. We are pilgrims traveling together across the provinces of the continent.”

Hōzōin bowed her head calmly and courteously.

“I recognize you as the renowned exorcist of the continent, Aoi Onijūrō-sama...”

“Are you one of his men too...?”

“Well, one could say we are of the same band. But we are not part of the conspiracy Aoi-sama awaits.” Though deferential, Hōzōin had no intention of easing Onijūrō's tension.

The demon exorcist, baring her fangs as she inched closer, spat venomously.

“Then why did that man sneak into the Lord's residence last night? State your purpose!”

“That... is truly a shameful thing to confess...”

“You won't speak?!”

“Yes... the truth is, this Jakotsumaru has been a lecher since birth...”

“H-Hold on, Hōzōin-sama...”

“Shh! Is this not the truth?!” Suppressing Jakotsumaru's agitation, Hōzōin pressed on.

“Moreover... he has absolutely no interest in girls of marriageable age... but conversely, he has an insatiable fascination with young girls...”

“Wh-what...?” Onijuro slowly turned to look at Jakotsumaru with contempt, as if he were filth. Unconsciously, the tip of her sword recoiled.

“Yes, and... by chance, at the Takinomiya post station, he heard rumors of the princess. He somehow managed to catch just a glimpse of her... and ended up sneaking in...”

“Bah! Don't mock me!” A chill ran down Onijuro's back as she roared. Her sword-gripping arms instantly trembled. Filled with rage and contempt, Onijuro glared at Jakotsumaru. “Do you expect me to accept such an excuse?! This is beyond mockery!”

“But... Hōzōin-sama is correct... I'm terribly ashamed...”

“Ashamed? Is that all it takes?! You filthy creature...!” That was all she could say. He might not be an enemy, but even if he were an ally, he was not a man who could be forgiven. Lust was the human vice Onijuro detested most. And a pedophile...

“Well... it's just that my tastes differ a little from others. Just a little...”

The nun stifled a hollow laugh with a cough. “In any case... while Jakotsumaru's actions were a terrible prank... we know nothing of any plot targeting the princess. Please, would you put away that sword?”

Hōzōin bowed her head once more. Jakotsumaru followed suit, prostrating himself. But...

“Enough! Enough!” Onijuro readied her sword once more. “Don't think that clears you of suspicion!”

“You still doubt us?”

“Of course I do! If I believed every story like that, I'd be useless as an exorcist!”

“Would it help if I spoke instead of Jakotsumaru?”

“Of course not!” The exorcist flatly dismissed Hōzōin's words. “Even if you’re a nun... I can't trust someone who raised a boy obsessed with young girls while disguised as a woman!”

“What did you say?!”

“In her mid-thirties, appearing respectable... That's exactly the kind of person who's most suspicious!”

Jakotsumaru couldn't help but burst out laughing. Even in this tense moment, his shoulders shook. “Th-thirty-something? Onijūrō-sama, that's an overestimation, even for you...” But by the time Jakotsumaru regained his composure, Hōzōin's entire body was already trembling violently. The pent-up frustration from her previous submissive stance was about to erupt. Just as Jakotsumaru realized this and tried to stifle his laughter...

“SHUT UP!” Hōzōin roared, thrusting the tip of her Kongō staff right at Onijūrō.

“You think being humble will get you anywhere? You insolent little upstart... you suspicious little piece of trash exorcist!”

"What? Piece of trash... you say?!"

“Yes, a worthless exorcist! You young upstart, you know nothing of respecting your elders!”

“Guhh, if you let me speak!”

“It is that very heart of yours, which trusts neither man nor cursed spirits, that will destroy you exorcists! Why do you still not understand this?!”

“You... you lot are the ones...” Overwhelmed by the unexpected fury of the nun, Onijuro also stepped forward. “Why let cursed spirits that threaten human lives run wild! Why live alongside them!?”

“The fault lies with those who cannot live alongside us!”

“Stop spouting nonsense!”

“It is no sophistry!”

Somehow, far removed from the shouting match, Jakotsumaru began scratching his nape. Yet, upon spotting that relaxed figure, Onijuro's fury only intensified.

“Face me, Jakotsumaru! I'll cleave that filthy body of yours with my blade!”

"Now, now, I'm afraid not. This is Takamagahara, where cursed spirits hold no power, right? Even my bonded cursed spirits can't be used here. I'm bound to lose."

“Then come at me with your sword! Draw it like a man!”

But the cursed spirit user, clapping his hands, let out a hollow, hollow laugh.

“Ha ha ha, even more impossible. Dodging is my specialty... but I can't wield a sword.”

“Coward! Weakling! You're no man!”

“Haha... That last bit applies to you too, Onijūrō-sama” Jakotsumaru laughed awkwardly, trying to brush it off, but Hōzōin had completely forgotten his usual composure.

“Where are you looking, Aoi Onijūrō! Your opponent is me!”
“Very well, that's exactly what I want!”
“Ho, Hōzōin-sama, perhaps you should stop...”
“You keep quiet!”
“That's right! Cowards should stay out of the way!”
The two women's shouts brushed aside any attempts at mediation. Hōzōin swiftly swung the tip of her staff free. The stone-tipped end fell to the ground, revealing the hidden, sharp spearhead beneath.
“Behold my Hōzōin-ryū spear technique—even without cursed spirits, it's a spectacle worth seeing!” It was no longer the voice of a nun. The voice of a spear master, crackling with killing intent, thundered around them.
“Secret Sword, First Stroke...” Onijūrō too sharpened her focus on a single strike. “Behold this gift for the afterlife...!”
(Ah, just do whatever you want...)
Jakotsumaru sank to the ground, having given up on everything.
Against the backdrop of the starry sky, two blades inched closer. The cursed spirit user, lying on the ground, had decided to watch silently...

“Ugh, they’re sure taking their time...” Matashiro started to mutter to himself, then clamped his mouth shut. Peddlers passed by, staring at him suspiciously before walking away. The boy leaning against the roadside stone Buddha statue straightened up involuntarily.
“Honestly... How long am I supposed to wait?”
The vast reed field stretched between the Oura River and the Sakezuma River. Few people walked the narrow path connecting the two river crossings. In that desolate field, Matashiro waited alone, left behind.
“At this rate, she must be having quite a struggle...” Yet, Matashiro felt not the slightest worry for his master battling in the unseen realm. He was simply growing bored. Confirming the absence of others, Matashiro muttered to himself once more. “At this rate, I'll be left behind by everyone.....” Muttering to himself, the boy stretched his slender frame. Beyond the path lay the crossing point of the Sakezuma River.
The remaining troop at the crossing formed the rear of the procession. Recognizing this, the boy felt a momentary sense of relief. But...
“Huh...?”
The cavalry began to stir in a flurry of commotion. But that wasn't all. Soldiers were entering the river one after another, even though no ferries were prepared.
“N-no way...!” His panicked gaze darted toward the water's surface. In the middle of the great river, a fleet of ferries was stuck. On one particularly large boat, there was definitely a palanquin... and on the deck...
“This is bad...!” Matashiro bellowed into the invisible barrier.

"Chiii-i-i-i!!!” Without pause, Onijūrō kicked off the ground in pursuit. A white blade fell from above, aimed at the nun who had landed first. But a vajra staff, its tip

exposed, clanged loudly, stopping the blow. At point-blank range, the two locked in a direct grapple.

“Honestly... if only she'd take it off, she'd be a beauty...”

Jakotsumaru toyed with a torn reed, observing the powerful lines of Onijuro's body. That leisure was shattered...

“Master!” The sudden voice made Jakotsumaru flinch violently.

“Whoa, you scared me! Seriously!”

“Master, can you hear me?” Only Jakotsumaru reacted to the voice of the still-young child. The two women, locked in their standoff, glared at each other, neither willing to back down. The troubled cursed spirit user searched around for the owner of the unseen voice.

“W-who are you?”

“Wh-whose voice is that? Is Master not here?!”

Voices unfamiliar to each other questioned back and forth, faces unseen. With no other choice, Jakotsumaru reluctantly turned to face the exorcist.

“No, no.”

“Um... Was that voice just now someone Lord Onijuro knows?”

“Ah! It's my disciple, Matashiro!”

“He seemed to be calling out for something...”

“Shut up! This isn't the time for that!”

He snapped without even meeting his gaze. Frowning, Jakotsumaru decided to respond on his own. “Um... Your master is currently occupied. If you have business, I can relay it...”

“So, who are you?!”

“The one your master ambushed.”

“Ah, the spineless fellow who, at his age, wears thick makeup like some third-rate, unsuccessful onnagata?”

“Wh-what?!”

“Huh? Not a third-rate onnagata, but a wooden actor? Anyway, you're the one who snuck in last night, right?”

Even more indignant, Jakotsumaru snorted. “Your master described me like that?! That's beyond rude!”

“Ah... sorry! This isn't the time for that...”

“What's going on, Matashiro!” Finally, Onijuro parried Hōzōin's staff and stepped out of range. The nun was also gasping for breath after the prolonged confrontation. But before he could tend to Hōzōin, Jakotsumaru was already lumbering toward the exorcist.

“You! What did you tell your disciple about me?! That's a terrible insult!”

“What are you talking about?”

“What do you mean?”

“You're playing dumb! You called me a flashy, thickly made-up woman, a third-rate onnagata...”

“Did I say that? I merely said you were a disgusting, foolish-looking man...”

“Either way, it's despicable!”

But Matashiro's urgent voice silenced them all from the sky. “Stop it, Master! The procession is in trouble! The boat carrying the palanquin on the Sakemegawa River...”

Just as the disciple spoke, Onijuro swiftly formed a seal with both hands.

“Exorcise the evil!” Suddenly, the night sky vanished. In its place appeared the clear autumn sky from moments before. Having dissolved the cursed spirit space Takamagahara, Onijuro turned to look at Matashiro standing on the path.

“Follow me! Matashiro!” Saying only that, she began to run. As the boy's back disappeared into the distance, Jakotsumaru snapped back to his senses.

“W-wait a minute! What happened?!”

“Shut up! We'll settle this another time!” With a curse, master and disciple vanished before his eyes. Stunned, Jakotsumaru sighed.

“Seriously... First he ambushes me on his own, and now he just disappears off somewhere on his own...”

Behind her frustration, Hōzōin lay panting, completely spent. Clinging to her staff, she couldn't even speak now. The cursed spirit user was utterly exasperated.

“Everyone ignores me and just does whatever they want... Hozoin-sama, this time I'll be the one doing whatever I want!” With that, Jakotsumaru dashed toward the crossing point. With the barrier broken, the cursed spirit user feared nothing. Sniffing out the scent of danger and calamity, Jakotsumaru reached a finger toward the crystal ball.

“Th-these bastards...” Nagamori's sword trembled at the sight of the attackers who appeared. But it was no wonder. The samurai guarding the palanquin boat were all cursed spirit foot soldiers who wielded cursed spirits. Every single one of them, like Nagamori, couldn't hide their terror.

A tense standoff flowed across the deck - four attackers stood at the ship's rail. No, could they even be counted as human? While humanoid in form, they looked nothing like people. Dark, mud-like figures. Their bodies, formed from rotting sludge, were thickly covered in water plants.

At the ends of their long arms, numerous hook-like claws extended like appendages. And where their heads should be, bulging, eyeball-like orbs were exposed, devoid of eyelids. Their foul-smelling mouths were lined with yellow fangs, and their threatening roars evoked the mating cries of female cats.

“Lord Senior Retainer!”

“Cut them down!” Nagamori issued the order instantly.

“If we fail to defend this ship, our lives are forfeit! Spare no life—all of you, die!”

“Aye!” The cursed foot soldiers of Unshū responded, kicking off from the ship's bottom. They leapt boldly, charging straight toward the monsters. In that instant, Nagamori flung open the palanquin door and yanked the bride's hand toward him.

“Quickly, Princess! Here!”

“Nagamori, this... this...” A flustered voice cried out as a woman wearing a market woman's hat rushed out. The old retainer quickly hid the princess, who had covered her face, behind his back.

“To the stern! Quickly, to the helmsmen!” Nagamori pointed at the two men desperately rowing the oars. The stern was indeed the spot most isolated from the attackers on this ship. Yet the trembling princess remained clinging to the old minister's back.

“Bu-but... but Nagamori...” Her faint voice trembled in short bursts. With no other choice, Nagamori slowly backed away step by step, still carrying the princess on his back. At the narrow bow, the attackers and the line of samurai were steadily closing the distance. Staring fixedly at the still distant opposite shore, Nagamori showed his impatience.

“Boatman, hurry up! Row faster!”

“Y-yes! B-but...” The boatman's reply trembled behind him for some reason. He realized the ferry's movement had also slowed.

Only now did Nagamori shift his gaze to his surroundings. His eyes...

“W-what... is that...!”

The old man finally grasped the crisis facing the entire fleet. The water surrounding the palanquin boat was churning with an unnatural swell. Something enormous, a creature as large as a house, was circling the palanquin boat. Its movements blocked the small boats carrying the guarding soldiers, preventing any from approaching. Not only that, but the palanquin boat itself was being held back from advancing.

“You monster...!” Just as Nagamori gritted his teeth...

“Dieeeee!” The first shrill scream echoed. One of those facing the attacker finally swung down his sword. The swift blade tip was wrapped in the cursed spirit's lightning. The advancing monster's rotten left arm was severed from the elbow down.

“Got it?!”

The ear-splitting scream made Nagamori clench his fist involuntarily. But the scream came from the cursed spirit foot soldier who had, in fact, been struck down.

“L-Lord Chief Retainer!” He screamed, dropping his sword, writhing in agony. The victim clutched his face with both hands as he writhed. The monster had sprayed slimy black bodily fluid from the severed stump of its arm. The foot soldier, having been drenched in the spray, had skin turning purple.

“Guh...!” Nagamori shuddered in horror. The attacker whose arm had been severed flashed his blade at the wound. In an instant, the limb below the elbow regenerated. He then mounted the fallen man. A sharp blade sliced through the first throat. A gurgling death rattle. Blood splattered the ship's deck as the monster smiled.

Next, the attackers let out a chorus of shrill screams. Simultaneously, they shot black saliva from deep within their throats. The viscous drool stuck to the foot soldiers' bodies, and the smell of burning flesh filled Nagamori's nostrils.

“Hiiiiiiii!”

“Gahhh...!”

The monster's highly acidic saliva dissolved the foot soldiers through their clothing. The creatures swarmed the writhing soldiers. They sank their teeth into throats, shaking them violently to tear them apart. They drove hooked claws into bellies, dragging out entrails. Those drenched in saliva at close range fell, their white skulls exposed. It was a merciless slaughter.

“We're... we're gonna die!” The boatmen trembled, their voices shaking. They exchanged glances... then abruptly abandoned the oars.

“W-wait! You bastards!” But Nagamori's shouts fell on deaf ears. Without looking back, the boatmen plunged into the river's current.

“Bring the boats closer! The boats...!” Nagamori shouted, scanning the area again. But not a single small boat could come to his aid.

All were blocked by the monster in the water, unable even to approach the palanquin boat. The soldiers could only thrust their long spears into the waves, trying to keep the monster at bay.

Yet the monster paid no heed to the small boats, closing in on the boatmen desperately striving for the shore.

Its swimming technique remained unchanged. With a deep dive, its massive body closed in on the fugitives.

“We’re g-gonna get eaten!” That's how the final scream sounded. But the shriek was soon crushed by its ravenous jaws.

For an instant, the monster's head broke the surface. The flattened skull was unmistakably that of a centipede. Yet the sharp, double-layered, shovel-shaped fangs were unlike any insect's. With a crunching sound of crushed bones, the monster devoured the two boatmen one after the other.

"You... you bastard... .....!" Nagamori raised his blade in despair.

The slaughter was already complete. Only one old retainer remained aboard the palanquin boat. Realizing Nagamori's helplessness, the attackers slowed their advance. Now they could strike the princess at the stern anytime. The hideous mud-clad figures seemed to sneer with that thought.

“Princess... I am filled with regret!” Taking another step back, Nagamori gritted his teeth...

“In this situation... prepare yourself quickly.”

“...I am ready... Nagamori...” The girl nodded from behind him, having already freed the guard pin from her dagger. Her composed voice, too, knew this was the end.

“Princess Chizuru! Princess!”

“Nagamori-sama!” The soldiers' screams echoed from the surrounding small boats. But their cries were futile. Dripping filthy mud onto the deck, the monsters began closing in for the fatal blow...

“Master, that is...!”

Even without being told, Onijūrō was staring intently at the gondola boat. People falling, swarmed by monstrous creatures. And being driven back...

“Boats!” Se shouted, scanning the landing. “Boats, Matashirō! Catch up by boat!”

“There are none, Master! Not a single one!” The pursuing cavalry charged boldly into the great river. But they would surely be hindered by the monster prowling the waters. Resolve hardening, the exorcist sprinted toward the riverbank.

“What are you doing, Master?!”

“You won't know unless you try! Don't underestimate it!”

“Let go! I'll swim across!”

“That's madness! How can you wield your sword in the water against that monster?!”

Pushing her disciple away, Onijuro plunged into the river with a splash. Her arms, driven by desperation, frantically cut through the water. Fixing her gaze on the gondola boat from the surface, Onijuro prayed desperately.

(If only... I hadn't tried ambushing them! This is my failure! All my fault...! Make it in time! Please make it in time!)

Regret fueled her panic. Yet the gondola showed no sign of drawing nearer. The demon exorcist cursed under his breath at the river's sheer width.

“Damn it... Why is it so far away...!”

“Well, what can you do about it?” Suddenly, a voice answered his soliloquy.

“Your water skills are quite impressive... but swimming there is a bit much, don't you think?”

“Y-You...!” Stunned, Onijuro looked up at the sky. The voice's owner was there. Yes, in the very sky.

Jakotsumaru stood there, his hair fluttering in the breeze that drifted across the river's surface. He looked down on the exorcist's efforts, even wearing a faint smile. His feet rested on a copper coin the size of a tatami mat. Stepping firmly on the floating coin, the cursed spirit user flashed a look of utter exasperation.

“You didn't have to swim... If you'd just asked, I could have carried you on this gold spirit...”

“Shut up! An exorcist borrowing a cursed spirit's power? Over my dead body!”

“I don't think this is the time for such talk...” Swimming, Onijuro fell silent. She wouldn't say another word. Jakotsumaru sighed, seemingly utterly exasperated. “You really are stubborn. But I'll lend a hand. I can't just stand by and watch people get killed like that...”

“.....”

“Understood. Well then... I'll go first!” In that instant, a gust of wind tore across the water's surface.

The mobile cursed spirit, Kinrei, charged at lightning speed into the fleet. Yet its rider remained utterly composed. Noticing this bizarre intruder, the ship's guards instinctively drew their swords.

“Who the hell are you?!”

“New attackers?!”

Startled, the attackers on the palanquin boat also looked up. But it was too late. Jakotsumaru had already reached right before them. The Cursed Spirit User pursed his lips.

“I present myself!” Shouting, Jakotsumaru leapt from the Kinrei. His white, long-sleeved kimono fluttered as he aimed for the gondola below. The attackers leapt backward. Before the stunned Nagamori, the Cursed Spirit User landed with grace.

“W-Who are you…!”

The moment Nagamori began to speak.....

Jakotsumaru hurled the crystal clenched in his fist toward the sky.

“Emerge, Enra Enra!” At the command, the crystal orb transformed into a swirling pillar of fire. A searing roar split the air, and a writhing whirlwind of flame suddenly descended upon the attackers' heads.

“Gaaaahhhhh!”

A ragged death cry. The two in front were engulfed by the flames first. The mud-like humanoids became human torches, writhing in agony from the intense heat. A foul stench assaulted their noses. Yet, shoving their screaming comrades into the river, the two rear creatures launched a reckless charge.

“Princess!” Nagamori instinctively scooped up the girl in the market woman's hat. But, targeting the charging enemies, Jakotsumaru calmly unleashed the next crystal ball.

“Seven Swords Mountain!” The voice rang out, and the dolls halted abruptly. Nagamori gasped. Multiple drawn blades suddenly appeared within them, impaling the attackers from all sides. There were no screams now. The mud dolls seemed to flinch for an instant before collapsing with a squelch onto the ship's deck. The humanoid forms crumbled, leaving only a pile of filthy mud.

The entire battle had been over in the blink of an eye.

“W-who are you...?”

Questioned by Nagamori, Jakotsumaru finally turned to face him. A cheerful smile nodded. “I am Jakotsumaru, a traveling cursed spirit user. I have come to rescue the princess, the Governor of Unshu.”

(So it's you...)

Jakotsumaru fixed his gaze on the old man's back. The girl in the market woman's hat still clung to Nagamori. Petite and delicate. Yet her pale pink robe, the very thing a cursed spirit user craves, hatefully concealed her face. Even so...

(Beautiful...)

Jakotsumaru's feminine intuition keenly sensed her true nature. Fragrant... was that the right word? Like a bud reaching its peak bloom, scattering a rich floral scent... Something about the girl had captured Jakotsumaru.

It was there.

But...

The luxury of admiring beauty was fleeting.

With a sudden splash, a colossal form leapt into the air from right beside the gondola. The roar of the Centipede-Shaped Kuwagata as it kicked off the river's surface. High, sideways waves tossed the gondola about amidst the spray, slamming Nagamori and Chizuru's bodies hard against the bottom of the boat.

“Stay down...” Jakotsumaru shouted, leaping onto the approaching golden spirit. He wasn't fond of the boat's swaying. The cursed spirit user, now airborne, pointed at the giant form on the river's surface with his fingertips.

“Burn it! Slash it to pieces!”

Gliding through the air on the cursed spirit, Jakotsumaru exposed himself right before the monster's eyes. A shrill, metallic scream pierced his ears. Dodging the monster's greedy jaws, the Cursed Spirit User swiftly escaped downstream.

The monster dragged its serpentine body out of the water, relentlessly pursuing the flying copper coin. But upon its back, the flames and blades of the summoned cursed spirits, Enra Enra and Shichikenzan, leapt into action. Against its steel-like, jet-black shell, the flames and blades of the cursed spirits clashed. The centipede-like Kuwagata recoiled violently from the fierce scorching heat and slashing blows.

In that opening, small boats swarmed the palanquin boat. Guard ships quickly came alongside the vessel that had lost its helmsman. The princess's small body was hurriedly entrusted to one of them.

“Quickly, Princess!”

“But Nagamori, that one... that one...”

Chizuru, aboard the small boat, desperately looked back. Downstream, further downstream, the figure of Jakotsumaru, distancing itself from the battlefield,

gradually grew smaller. The girl strained to hold onto the sight of its soaring, valiant form. But Nagamori signaled to the boatman.

“To the opposite shore, no matter what! While that man holds them off!” The old retainer also left the palanquin boat and transferred to the small boat with Ichimegasa. Watching the battle from afar, the fleet set off again for the opposite bank.

But halfway down the Sakezuma River, Onijuro had finally arrived. Yet the fleet was already beginning to head for shore. Even the cavalry, though scattered, was pursuing the boats.

“Damn it! Wait! Hey!” Her travel clothes, soaked with water, grew heavier by the moment. Cursing, the exorcist threw herself into the current and began crossing.

Then, within that current...

“K... Kanbee-dono!” A man floating face-up on the water entered Onijuro's field of vision. Kanbee Obata, his face deathly pale, eyes closed, was drifting downstream. The exorcist frantically paddled her hands through the water.

“Kanbee-dono, hold on! Kanbee-dono!” Shouting, Onijuro reached the young samurai. Grasping Kanbee's face, which hadn't even blinked, the demon exorcist swam with even greater force.

But the river surface undulated wildly, churned by the waves created by the mad centipede-shaped monster downstream. The monster, confused by the swift movements of the bound spirits, couldn't even return a single arrow to Jakotsumaru. Meanwhile, the summoned cursed spirits piled on minor wounds, steadily chipping away at the monster's life force.

“Still, it won't be a fatal blow...”

Dodging the attack once more, Jakotsumaru clenched a new crystal ball.

“It'll take a lot of spiritual energy... but I have no choice!” His slender fingers flicked the crystal into the air. A gentle parabola. The orb fell toward the monster's head, instantly materializing as it absorbed Jakotsumaru's spiritual energy.

A black sphere, roughly ten zhang in diameter, like a small mountain, appeared in the air. Crackling lightning whips coiled around its surface. The black sphere plummeted straight toward the madly charging monster.

“Please, Eye Power!” Snaking Bone-Maru shouted as he rapidly retreated from above the monster. The colliding colossal bodies stirred up surging waves, locking in a frontal grapple beneath the water. The centipede-shaped Kuwagata's screams shook the rippling river surface.

Then, the black sphere... opened its eyelids.

Black irises, black pupils. At their center, a poisonous red pupil appeared. Its gaze locked firmly onto the monster, and with a muffled rumble, it launched its attack.

“W-What on earth is that...!” Nagamori, who had finally reached the shore, stared dumbstruck at the fierce battle downstream. The gathered soldiers, the entire procession, all gasped at this unearthly combat. Even Chizuru pushed aside her hood slightly, her gaze fixed.

Amidst all eyes, the Summoned Cursed Divine Eye sent forth a fierce whip of lightning. Twisting bolts of lightning bound the centipede-shaped monster's entire body. Its

agonized scream reached both banks as its massive form spun on the water's surface.

“Now! Finish it!” Jakotsumaru's command echoed through the flames and down to the Seven Swords Mountain. A whirlwind of fire and a swarm of blades charged toward the lightning-bound monster. Lightning and searing heat combined, blinding flashes illuminating the area. Nagamori and the others instinctively lowered their gaze.

But the blinding light vanished in an instant.

The people on the shore cautiously opened their eyes. But the river surface had already regained its stillness. No monster, no black eyeball. And neither the whirlpool of flames nor the swarm of blades remained. As if nothing had happened, the Sakematsu River had returned to its usual flow.

Only the figure of the smiling cursed spirit user remained in the sky above. Gazing up at that heroic figure from the water's surface, the exorcist gritted his teeth.

“Truly, how can I possibly thank you...” Masuda Nagamori bowed deeply at the ferry crossing. “Without your aid, Jakotsumaru-sama, the princess's life would have been taken. I am profoundly grateful...”

The Sakakibara retainers lined up behind him also prostrated themselves before the cursed spirit user. Unaccustomed to such obsequious treatment, Jakotsumaru felt nothing but embarrassment.

“No, no... I only did what was natural. Above all, the princess is safe and sound. That is what matters most. I am relieved.”

“And from me too...” Saying this, Chizuru stepped forward. “My thanks, Jakotsumaru-dono. As Nagamori said, without your aid, I would not be alive. Truly... you saved my life.”

The hood still concealed Chizuru's features. Jakotsumaru inwardly gritted his teeth, but could never voice it aloud. Surrounded by the others' cheerful faces, it was hard to voice his true feelings.

Then, from the riverbank...

A rude splash pierced his ears. Turning, Jakotsumaru noticed a dark figure climbing out of the water.

The exorcist, carrying Kanbee, arrived on the opposite bank with a sullen expression.

“What?! You actually swam across?!”

"Of course! I wouldn't dream of relying on anyone else!"

To Jakotsumaru's stunned expression, Onijuro immediately shouted back. She was clearly out of breath. The soaking wet exorcist handed Kanbee over to the soldiers rushing to him, then instinctively sank to the ground.

“This samurai... is the one I teased last night, right?”

“I was one of those teased too!”

“Now, now, you're soaked through. You'll catch a cold!”

“Stay away! I won't accept your pity!”

“What a lovely woman, dripping wet...” At the curse-wielder's smile, Onijuro's hand instinctively went to her sword. But hearing Nagamori's voice as he rushed over, the killing intent vanished for the moment.

“Onijuro-sama, you're late!” The old retainer glared at Kanbee, who was being tended to, and pressed him in a fierce tone. “Weren't you supposed to swiftly deal with those unruly scoundrels and rush to the palanquin?!”

“That very unruly scoundrel...” With an exasperated look, Onijuro pointed at Jakotsumaru. "...This ridiculous man here. I splendidly failed to finish him off, though..."

“Wh-what did you just say...? Now...?” Nagamori's flustered face stared at Jakotsumaru. The cursed spirit user smiled and silently nodded. In that instant, the old minister's anger suddenly reached its peak.

“Foolish! This man is our savior! Heaven's aid who rescued the princess!”

“And last night, he was the thief who tried to sneak into the princess's bedchamber...!”

Onijuro intended this to be a devastating blow. Pointing at Jakotsumaru, who whistled at the empty sky, the exorcist bared her fangs and spat out a torrent of abuse. “Do you, Lord Senior Advisor, truly believe this wretch?! This creature, a man yet pretending to be a woman, is a fool! He even wears makeup—a shameless disgrace!”

“But Onijuro-sama, you're a woman pretending to be a man...”

“Shut up...! This battle was likely just another act! It's all part of his scheme to get close to the princess! We cannot let our guard down for even a moment!”

It was a tirade poured out with every ounce of her being. She had fought endlessly against Jakotsumaru, helped Kanbee cross the great river, and now unleashed this torrent of rage. It was strength beyond the reach of ordinary people..

“But his fighting just now... it didn't seem like an act...”

“That's the trap! The opening!” Growing impatient with Nagamori's complacency, Onijuro couldn't stay seated any longer. “That smile! That grin! A man who smiles for no reason is never a good man!”

“But I'm quite confident in my smile...”

“Go die! Everything about you is a trick to deceive us! A cursed demon! Surely, Lord... you don't intend to add this man to your procession's guard, do you?!”

“Oh, indeed, that tactic could...” Suddenly realizing, Nagamori clapped his hands. That gesture poured oil onto the flames of Onijuro's rage.

“What utter nonsense!” The exorcist shook her wet hair wildly. “Why would the procession be guarded by such a fool...”

“But his fighting skills are undeniable...”

“It's a trap! Such a transparent ploy!”

“You don't trust me at all, do you...”

“Of course not! Who would trust you?!” The sharp insults continued unabated. As the procession watched in stunned silence, Onijuro finally lunged at the Cursed Spirit User. “Dammit, refuse him! Tell him no!”

“Well, but... if I tag along, it might turn into something interesting... I thought...”

“Don't be ridiculous! This isn't a game!”

“Guh, I can't breathe...!” The exorcist shook Jakotsumaru violently by the collar. But finally, the Supreme Voice separated them.

“Onijuro-sama, is it not enough already...?” At that sound, Onijuro's grip suddenly loosened. The roar ceased the moment she saw Chizuru step forward. The princess placed her hand on Onijuro's wet shoulder, her quiet voice trembling.

"It is fine, Lord Onijuro. I believe in this person. The one who saved us... Therefore, we shall take him with us. Will you not also trust Jakotsumaru-sama alongside me?"

In terms of trust, Onijuro clearly had the advantage. Yet, Chizuru trusted the enigmatic Jakotsumaru. The Cursed Spirit User clenched his fists, trembling, and looked up to the heavens in awe.

And Onijuro too...

She couldn't defy Chizuru's voice. Was it the power of the cursed spirit beads after all? She simply couldn't go against this princess. She'd grant any request. Just as at their first meeting, the exorcist could only silently nod.

“What a lucky bastard...!” Giving a low growl, Onijuro released the Cursed Spirit User. Then, on her back...

“O-Onijuro-dono...” Suddenly, his name was called. The hoarse, faint voice belonged to Kanbee. Hurrying, Onijuro rushed over to the samurai lying on the ground.

“Hold on, Kanbee-dono!”

“I... I'm utterly ashamed...” A muffled groan escaped his lips. But the court physician, taking his pulse, offered a faint smile.

Knowing it was nothing serious, Onijuro breathed a sigh of relief.

“What? There's no need to worry. The princess and Lord Nagamori are both safe.”

“Then Onijuro-dono saved the princess...” "

“No, no, that's not it.” Suddenly leaning closer, Jakotsumaru flashed a smile. “I was the one who saved her. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“You... you bastard...!” Exchanging glances, Kanbee reflexively tried to sit up. But Onijuro had no choice but to hold him down.

“It's fine, Kanbee-dono. True, this fellow saved the princess. It seems we should be thanking him.”

“Truly? Is that...?”

“The princess forgave him. Isn't that enough?” Her resigned tone explained with apparent dissatisfaction. But Jakotsumaru still felt it wasn't enough.

“You've become quite obedient, haven't you? But I haven't actually heard any words of thanks?”

“He bowed in his heart. That should suffice, shouldn't it?”

Onijuro reluctantly looked up at Jakotsumaru and exhaled heavily, as if in pain.

“But... you certainly got skill. You're more useful than you look, you bastard.”

At Onijuro's praise, the Cursed Spirit User flashed the rosary with bound cursed spirits.

"I didn't do anything. The little ones were the ones who fought. But..."

Trailing off, Jakotsumaru stepped toward the pier. Abandoned palanquin boats were already being towed and moored at the landing. Offering a silent bow to the samurai corpses being carried away, the Cursed Spirit User beckoned to Onijuro.

“About these guys, you see...” Jakotsumaru pointed at the collapsed mountain of sludge. Onijuro approached, turning her face away from the foul stench.

“Well, actually... they're not cursed spirits.”

“So this is the remains of a cursed spirit... Discard it quickly!”
He stated it matter-of-factly. The exorcist covered his mouth with a handkerchief, his gaze clouding over.
“Not a cursed god? Then what exactly are these things...”
“Excuse me for a moment...”
The cursed god user picked up a small branch from the water's edge and began poking around the mud pile. Reluctantly, Onijuro leaned closer. Soon, the branch had found a filthy piece of evidence buried within the remains.
“Look at this.”
“It's just grass, isn't it?”
“Yes. But this is the main body. Their true form is just grass. They're not cursed spirits at all.” Onijuro also scrutinized the thing hooked on the twig. Then, he let out a groan.
"Poison lacquer flowers...?
"Yes. The puppet spheres are there too. A low-grade cursed spirit that makes plants, rocks, animals, or even humans take human form and be controlled. It's undoubtedly the work of a cursed spirit user."
“So... there's a human among them?”
Jakotsumaru nodded, likely. Indeed, only humans use Puppet Orbs. Cursed Spirits don't need tools to perform cursed spirits.
But Onijuro couldn't accept it. The enemy should be Kurotsuru. Would a cursed god who has lived for two thousand years really have a human puppeteer under its command? Without resorting to such petty tricks as puppets, it should be capable of launching an attack with far more powerful cursed spirits. Or perhaps...
“What do you mean?”
“So you think so too, Onijuro-sama?”
“That this attack wasn't carried out by Kurotsuru?”
“It hasn't been definitively decided.”
“But isn't that a possibility?”
Onijuro couldn't affirm or deny it. Was there someone besides Kurotsuru targeting Chizuru? Or was there a puppeteer among Kurotsuru's group? She couldn't yet draw conclusions about this new possibility.
“The circumstances... I really need to hear the details, you see...”
“Shut up. I'll tell you eventually.”
“How cold-hearted...”
And to those two...
“Master!”
“Are you... unharmed, Jakotsumaru?”
A ferry laden with travelers docked on the opposite shore. Matashiro tumbled off the small boat and landed on the pier. Behind him, the headache-stricken Hōzōin scrambled to follow.
Spotting his soaking-wet master, Matashiro frantically fumbled for the bamboo tube at his waist.
“Master! To have crossed this great river...!”

“Impressed, you fool?!”
“Whoa! It's freezing! You're absolutely frozen through!”
“Of course! It's already the Tsukiyo moon! This isn't like taking a quick dip!”
“Here, to ward off the cold.”
Onijuro snatched the offered bamboo tube swiftly. The cloudy sake filling the flask made a sloshing sound as she drained it. Soon, warmth spread through her insides, and the exorcist let out an exaggerated sigh of satisfaction.
“Whew! I feel like I've come back to life!”
“As always, you drink it with such relish...”
Grinning, Onijuro shifted her gaze. “Damn it, what a pitiful nun...” She clicked his tongue and approached Hōzōin. “Have a drink. It's a welcome drink.”
Silently, Hōzōin looked up at the exorcist. Onijuro thrust the bamboo tube right under her nose. “Is that... acceptable? That sake... is sacred sake imbued with spiritual energy, isn't it?”
“Just one cup. When I cut you down earlier... you reeked of sake.”
“Why such a sudden...”
Questioned by the nun, Onijuro sighed. “Jakotsumaru... saved the princess. I must repay him. This is my repayment.”
“If it's repayment, then to Jakotsumaru...”
“I should... but I don't want to. Even though I understand the logic, the urge to refuse is strong. That's why I'm giving this to you.” Forcefully, the exorcist handed over the bamboo tube. “I still... can't bring myself to thank him. To me, he's not the sort of man I feel like thanking.”
“Quite right.”
“I do think... he did well...” Honestly, Onijuro laid bare her feelings. She knew no explanation was needed, yet her mouth moved anyway. Even that explanation couldn't shake off its awkwardness.
But Hōzōin responded with a weary smile. It was as if she saw right through the exorcist's confusion. Feeling uncomfortable, Onijūrō tightened her face and straightened her posture with an exaggerated cough.
“The procession departs soon. If you're coming along, have a drink and perk yourself up properly!” The exorcist snorted rudely. It was her awkward way of acknowledging someone who recognized his skill. To such a clumsy master, Matashiro offered a small sake cup.
“Master, please drink this...”
“Oh, yes... Hozoin-dono, the sake...” He started to say... then master and disciple froze in shock.
Gulp, gulp! Her throat made a satisfied sound. Right before their eyes, Hōzōin placed his hands on her hips and poured the sake from the bamboo tube straight into her guts in one go. She sucked up the last drop with a slurping sound, and the nun let out a satisfied sigh. “Phew!” Her flushed face exhaled a cloud of stale breath.
“You... you drank it all... Master...”
“The entire flask...” Onijūrō's grief instantly turned to fury.
“You rotten...”

“Ahhhhh!” Behind the screaming Onijuro, another roar echoed. There stood the figure of the cursed spirit user, utterly despairing.
“I... I don't care anymore...”
“What's that? Don't give me that wilted look!”
“Yes, because the end of the world has begun...”
“What nonsense are you spouting...!”
“Ah... I should have stopped it after all... But if I had intervened, I would have been killed...”
“What good does crying do! I'm the one who wants to cry! Your guardian drank my precious spiritually-infused sake...”
“I understand... but the real crying... is yet to come...”
“What do you mean by that...”
“M-Master!” The exorcist's anger was cut short by his disciple's scream. Onijuro and Jakotsumaru's gazes reacted to the vulgar laughter. A laugh that could never be mistaken for that of a nun... or any woman at all...
Truly... the end had begun...

【Chapter 3】

The castle overlooked the town from a small hill. Saginonohara's castle town spread out southwest, with the castle marking its northern boundary. Dusk had already fallen. The wedding procession advanced steadily along the highway, entering the town of Sagino.
“Quite a spacious castle town, isn't it?”
Onijuro's gaze was drawn to the shops lining both sides of the road. Lights were already being lit in the evening town. The lively clamor of the bustling streets naturally quickened the exorcist's pace.
"Saginohara is the second capital of Unshu Province, a key point in defending the Unshu Highway. Its prosperity is only natural; both people and goods abound here." From his horse, Obata Kanbee spoke up.
Drawing the attention of onlookers, the procession advanced through the town center, heading straight for the castle gate. The gazes of the townspeople focused first on the palanquin carrying the bride. This was common at any post town, but in this town, the number of people was unusually large. Feeling rather pleased, Jakotsumaru's steps grew lighter.
“What do you think, Onijuro-dono? Doesn't it feel like we're the real stars of this procession?”
“You've got some nerve, you...”
“Let's try to enjoy the situation a little. Being an exorcist, it seems, leaves no room for a little leisure in one's heart.”
But Matashiro shook his head and continued pushing the cursed spirit user's back with single-minded focus. "Just walk faster! What if everyone thinks we're the same kind as that person?!"
“You mean... my companion?” Jakotsumaru asked timidly.

Onijuro shot a glance to the rear of the procession, grinding her molars. At the very back stood a deranged individual who could never be mistaken for an escort. Their song echoed across the entire road. Jakotsumaru and Matashiro never dared look up at the sky.

“Dende dende dende dende bug's ×××× is~~♪”

Onijuro lowered his gaze.

“What a stupid song...”

The flushed madman staggered drunkenly after the procession. Hōzōin, already drained of her sake, reveled in the drunkenness, heedless of her surroundings.

“Obata-san, I truly apologize.” Jakotsumaru kept apologizing to the knight. “And this during the procession for the wedding... truly...”

“Well, if it happens only a few times a year... I'll make an exception today.”

“It really is only a few times a year, right?!”

Jakotsumaru gave a small nod to Onijuro's question.

“Yes, she gets drunk like that very rarely.”

“Well, she is your foster parent after all... Like mother, like son, I suppose.”

“I can't really argue with that.”

“Don't even try to explain! What the hell was that?! You drank all my sacred sake! That was my precious... bought at the mountain gate of Enshu Dendōji Temple...”

She started to curse... and then Onijūrō instinctively ducked. Jakotsumaru turned around. But it was too late.

“Jakotsumaru... Kuuuun!” A single flash from the Kongō staff shattered his skull. Caught off guard by Hōzōin's ambush, the Cursed Spirit User clutched his skull.

“Ah... ahhh...” His voice trembled. But the nun paid no heed, dragging Jakotsumaru up from his kneeling position.

“What's this? Taking a break? Come now, let's head for tonight's lodging!”

“Damn it, glad your hangover's cleared up, huh...”

“W-Who said anything about a hangover?!”

At that voice, Hozoin swung her staff and closed in on Onijuro.

“Onijuro! Did you think I was drinking since last night...?”

“No, no, that's not it at all...”

“That's right! I am not hungover! I am absolutely not drunk! Ho ho ho ho...”

Jakotsumaru stared after the departing, frenzied figure. “Why not let yourself be consumed by the sake, Onijuro-san? You'll become your true self.”

“I am honest. I always live true to myself. I have no need to be consumed by sake.”

But Jakotsumaru wriggled his long frame closer to Onijuro.

“No, no. If you look with honest eyes, you'll see how wonderful I am. How should I put it... my manliness, perhaps?”

“Don't be ridiculous! Stop it! People are watching! Get away! You! Have some shame!”

“Ah... Onijuro-sama's hair... it smells like fragrant wood has been burned into it...”

“Is that true, Master?”

“Lord Onijuro is surprisingly feminine, isn't he?”

But Onijuro shook her head vigorously.

“Don't be fooled, Matashiro! It's just drunken ramblings!”

“I haven't been drinking. Onijuro-san, it's not like it's something you need to hide anyway, ooh!”

Matashiro watched the two of them with a smile.

“She always tells me not to show weakness, not to let my guard down... yet she keeps such strict discipline himself... Well, I guess it's the first time she's met someone like this...”

Matashiro felt a sense of relief seeing his usually stern master being toyed with. After all, the master was human too. Sixteen years old, but the person himself...

(What the hell is this guy... After mocking me relentlessly, he flaunts his cursed spirit beads... After saving the princess so splendidly, he does this... (He's utterly filthy, a filthy cursed spirit user... But why... why...)

Jakotsumaru rubbed his cheek against her like a clingy cat. Placing a hand on his jaw, the exorcist tried to pull the man's body away from herself.

(Why am I letting such a bastard disturb my composure...)

(Why does such a bastard see through my... my hidden...)

She swallowed the thought. Stay calm, her usual self urged. Yet even so, Onijuro couldn't reclaim the continent's foremost exorcist. Unaware of Onijuro's turmoil, the procession pressed onward toward Sagino Castle.

“One month ago, this was found in the Gomado Hall of the main castle...”

Nagamori fluttered open the folded scroll. The letter was narrow and tightly folded. Intricately written characters, adorned with dazzling colors, filled the pages. Jakotsumaru drew the text closer and gave a slight nod.

“A secret message, I see...”

The cursed spirit user sighed, scanning the contents. The sweet sake still lingered, leaving him feeling queasy. Nevertheless, Nagamori and Kanbee, standing silently at his sides, fixed their gaze on Jakotsumaru.

"...This time, upon hearing that Lady Chizuru, daughter of the Sakakibara family, Governor of Unshu, is to be carried in procession to Zenshu, all the cursed spirits of Kizutani gathered together in council, and we hereby announce our resolve in advance. Kurotsuru, who rules Kizu, has long refrained from interfering in the affairs of the common folk. Yet regarding this marriage, we offer our counsel with displeasure. Should this counsel go unheeded, the entire clan, united, will rise up in attack, resolved to claim Lady Chizuru's life. We hereby inform you of this resolve in advance. A song that even the combined might of the Kizu clan cannot achieve, We are prepared. We earnestly request you reconsider this matter, fully aware of the gravity of our resolve... "

Having finished reading, Jakotsumaru raised his gaze. “Kurotsuru of Kizu...?”

He carelessly tossed the letter onto the spacious tatami room. The great hall near the main tower of Sagino Castle lay deserted. With only two candlesticks providing light, Nagamori and Kanbee stood arm in arm. Jakotsumaru scratched his temple with his fingertips, lost in thought for a moment.

“There's no mistake about this letter. Only someone possessing multiple attributes could use this many colors in a secret code.”

“You say it can be understood by color?”

“Yes. One color per attribute. Possessing two attributes allows for two colors... and the colors created by combining those two, plus the original colors themselves.”

Jakotsumaru looked down again at the iridescent text. “Only someone possessing five or more cursed spirit attributes could use this many colors. In Unshu Province, besides Kurotsuru, is there any other cursed spirit user or cursed spirit like that?”

He knew the answer was no, yet he asked to confirm. Nagamori closed his eyes solemnly.

“What's most baffling of all... is why Kurotsuru is targeting the princess... that single point.”

“Since our Sakakibara family assumed the governorship of Unshu, we have never once quarreled with Kurotsuru.”

“But there must be some connection?” The cursed spirit user's gaze questioned Kanbee. Without hesitation, the young warrior nodded deeply.

“Indeed. The tale in the fairy tale collection... The mirror stone Kurotsuru gave to the devout craftsman... No, the rosary made from the bewitching pearl of that bewitching pearl... It should still be here.”

“Here? More like in the princess's possession, right?” Jakotsumaru pointed beyond the closed sliding door. Beyond the hall lay the chamber prepared for Chizuru. Imagining her unseen face, the Cursed Spirit User smiled faintly. “Then... the cause must be the rosary.”

“Is that your conclusion?”

“If there's no other connection. Has the rosary ever been taken out of Unshu before?”

Both Nagamori and Kanbee shook their heads firmly. “No, never.”

“After all, it's a family treasure. It has been in our house since time immemorial, never once leaving for another country...”

“And now that family treasure is being taken out...”

Jakotsumaru's face suddenly twisted strangely. “Everyone, you've noticed that much, haven't you?”

“But to claim that as a reason to take her life...” Kanbee echoed Nagamori's words.

“Indeed. Then they should demand its return. Why would they go so far as to target his life... I cannot fathom it.”

“Yes... I suppose so.” The cursed spirit user pursed his lips and fell silent. The target was the rosary—that much was clear. But that rosary held some other meaning. Or perhaps...

(Could there be some other connection...?)

Either way, he had to ask. When he attacked... the Black Crane himself. The cursed spirit user had clearly, decisively determined his own mission...

By the time Jakotsumaru left the main keep, night had deepened considerably. Sagino Castle had its main keep atop the mountain peak, with baileys stretching down toward the foothills. The lodgings assigned to Jakotsumaru and his men were in the Ōsaki Bailey, closest to the main gate. The path down the slope was gentle but long. The cursed spirit user descended that slope, kicking small stones as he went.

(Kurotsuru's objective... The rosary... or something else entirely... Could it be... Princess Chizuru's life is the target...)

What Kurotsuru was thinking, what he was aiming for? The suspicion wouldn't leave his mind. Originally, cursed spirits detest the presence of humans and avoid contact with them as much as possible. Even those living in human settlements are like this. They rarely show themselves in public.

(They seem to exist, yet they don't. So why would such a cursed spirit... why would Kurotsuru... send such a letter so brazenly...?)

They were backed into a corner.

(So they sent that letter so brazenly...)
That was the only conclusion I could reach. But then why are they desperate? Nothing made sense. And using puppets for an attack? That didn't add up either. Scratching his head, the cursed spirit user sighed. Worrying wouldn't bring answers. Meeting Kurotsuru himself would provide clarity. All he could do was look forward to that meeting... that was all Jakotsumaru could do.
“I wonder how this will turn out...” Just as he murmured this to himself...
“What is it, my lord?” He was suddenly addressed. Jakotsumaru snapped to attention and turned to find a young warrior standing before him.
“...Ah, just talking to myself, Obata-san.”
“Ever since leaving the main keep, you've seemed deep in thought. Surely it's about Kurotsuru?” The Cursed Spirit User had completely forgotten about Kanbee's presence. He had come down from the main keep with Jakotsumaru, saying he had business in another bailey. The Cursed Spirit User gave Kanbee, who carried a lowered lantern, a light smile.
“No, it's just... various things... matters related to cursed gods. I've been turning things over in my mind...”
“Have you noticed anything?”
“That's the thing... It's deeply appreciated that you've added me to the escort, but whether I'll be of any use...”
“That is too modest...” Kanbee responded with a broad smile. “Everyone in the procession acknowledged your work this afternoon. The princess herself ordered that I be added to your retinue... I, Kanbee, find it most reassuring.”
“And what of last night's work?”
“Ah ha ha, let's forget about that.” The two laughed and continued down the path.
“By the way, Lord Jakotsumaru...”
“What is it?”
“Why did you accept the escort duty?”
Suddenly, the lantern stopped. Turning back, Jakotsumaru answered without hesitation.
“Naturally, because I was moved by that princess.”
“Is that all?”
“Is that not enough?” Jakotsumaru continued smiling. “I am, as you see, a shady fellow. And a cursed spirit user, at that. One might say I'm the sort of man you'd be wise to be wary of.”
“.....”
“There was also last night's incident. It wouldn't be surprising if the princess disliked me. But Lady Chizuru said she would trust me. She trusted me based solely on that one time I defeated the puppets. Is it wrong to feel affection for such a princess?”
Kanbee didn't answer immediately. But Jakotsumaru, still smiling, raised his palm lightly. “I require no payment whatsoever. Though I have yet to see the princess's face, I shall do what little I can to ensure her safe arrival at the wedding.”
“And that truly suffices...?”
“It does. I live as I please, but I stake my life on what I love. Ah, wait a moment...”

Suddenly, the cursed spirit user strained his eyes into the night. His gaze fixed on the pine grove bordering the bailey. Something had moved.

“Jakotsumaru-san, is something...?”

“No... Your escort ends here. I have business to attend to.” With that, the cursed spirit user spun away. “It seems there's another... someone whose heart might be moved.” Holding his breath, Jakotsumaru crept into the shadows of the trees. From within that grove...

"Teeeee!!!” Targeting enemies in all directions, Onijuro thrusts slashes around her.

Her breathtakingly fierce swordplay is mesmerizingly graceful. As she sheathes his blade, applause erupts from somewhere.

“Brilliant! Truly the continent's foremost exorcist.”

“What? You...?” Onijuro turned away, looking thoroughly bored. Noticing her stern gaze, the cursed spirit user slowly approached. Onijuro, looking sullen, pulled the bucket closer. She plunged both hands into the cold water and began washing her face.

Jakotsumaru stared for a moment, captivated. There was no trace of makeup. Yet her well-proportioned, youthful features were dignified, radiating a certain unapproachable beauty. Taking a breath, the exorcist sat down at the base of a pine tree.

“Practicing at this hour?”

“My daily routine. It seems since last night... that ‘routine’ has been disrupted.”

“And that's my fault?”

“I hate to admit it, but it seems so.”

“I'm nothing but trouble...”

Hearing this, Onijuro looked up at Jakotsumaru. “And you, it seems you've been colluding with Nagamori-sama.”

“Who told you that?”

“I have a loyal disciple.”

“Ah, yes, that's right.” Satisfied, the cursed spirit user also sat down. The night breeze was cool. The only light came from the moon. Enchanted by the sound of insects around them, the two listened for a while.

Then, without either initiating it...

Their gazes met. The exorcist showed disgust, the cursed spirit user responded with a smile. Remembering the moment they first met, Onijuro sighed.

“...Damn it, why did I ever have to...”

“You truly dislike me, don't you...?”

“You must feel the same.” The exorcist calmed the lingering surge of her energy. “I thought it the first time I saw you – “this guy's a pain in the ass”. Irritating, prickly. You thought the same, didn't you?”

“Yes, indeed.”

“We're both cursed spirit users immersed in battle. We've been drilled to constantly distinguish friend from foe...”

“That body of yours recognized us as enemies. No...” With that, Jakotsumaru's smile shifted into a resigned grin. "If it were just an enemy... I could simply cut them

down. But somehow... there's an atmosphere that won't let us cut them down so easily..."

“I understand,” muttered Onijuro, nodding.

“It's not quite like facing a formidable foe either. Even though we've only just met, somehow... I felt this hateful sensation, like they held some weakness of mine. Like if I struck once, I'd surely be struck back twice as hard...”

“Yes, yes.” The Cursed Spirit User clapped his hands in agreement. “Why is that, I wonder? I too felt hatred toward you, Onijuro-dono, and at the same time... unease. You’re a nuisance, yet somehow hard to get rid of...”

“It seems we at least agree on that point.” Onijuro declared, then fell silent for a moment. Her hand, playing with the hand towel, paused for an instant. But suddenly, the exorcist slammed the hand towel against the bucket.

“Why must we fight together?!”

“It's fine, Her Highness commanded it! Besides, I've already accepted it.”

“Why?!” Onijuro's eyes glowed in the darkness. "How can you accept it?! How can I fight alongside the cursed spirit users I loathe most! I am the slayer of cursed spirits, you are the one who wields them! We are polar opposites!"

“Well, yes, that's true...”

“I've cut down hundreds, thousands of cursed spirits! Don't you hate me for it!”

Hearing this, Jakotsumaru also reexamined his own feelings. At a loss for words, the handsome man's face clouded over. “It's not that I'm taking back what I said earlier...” The cursed spirit user scratched his forehead. “When we first met, you said cursed spirits aren't all bad, right? Conversely... I also know they aren't all good either.”

“…..”

“Onijuro-san, even you don’t indiscriminately exterminate cursed spirits, do you? You accepts commissions to punish cursed spirits that have harmed humans...”

“But most exorcists aren't like that.” Onijuro plucked a blade of grass beside her.

"They're mostly self-styled exorcists who arbitrarily slay minor cursed spirits using crude magic, then demand payment... Most are pushy exorcists. I understand why that nun hates them."

“But you're different, aren't you, Onijuro-san?”

“How can you know that?” The exorcist's question confronted Jakotsumaru head-on. “We've only met... a single day ago, haven't we?”

Yet Jakotsumaru returned a calm smile. “No, it's true we've only met a day ago. But didn't you just say it yourself? We understood at first sight that we were mutually distasteful enemies.”

“That... is certainly...”

“It's the same thing. I understood. I understood that you, Onijuro-san, are not a foolish exorcist. That's why I helped save the princess.”

“But I, for one...” She trailed off, her words stuck in her throat.

“What is it? Is there something you wish to say?”

“...No, nothing. It would be pointless to say anything to you anyway.”

“That's kind of annoying... It's probably about me, isn't it?”

(I hate how sharp you are, seeing right through me!)
Onijuro clicked her tongue softly. This man slips right into the feelings people try to hide and then he acts all innocent, pretending he stumbled upon them by accident.
(This guy noticed my... woman... The woman I sealed away, locked deep inside my heart... And yet, he noticed my hair too.....)
A long-forgotten feeling of embarrassment flushed through the exorcist's body.
Taking a deep breath to steady himself, Onijuro glared at Jakotsumaru.
(In front of this guy, I can't regain my “Normal” state... Even so..... I am the “Constant”... Maintain composure in any situation... That was my master's teaching... And it is my teaching too. Or perhaps...)
Suddenly... Onijuro pondered her master's words.
(In any situation... That means... Did he also mean times when I must team up with scum like this...?)
She appraised Jakotsumaru with a contemptuous gaze. The Cursed Spirit User pulled back, looking puzzled.
“D-don't just stand there silently! Say something, will ya? This is creepy...”
“Shut up. I'm thinking. Be quiet. Follow me.”
(Even my master, if he saw such a strange fellow... But right now, we have no choice but to fight together... And we will, but... I'll protect my “Constant”. This too is training. How painful.)
“You too, a man favored by the princess. Since you're coming along... fight with the resolve to die...” She spat out the words roughly, and the Cursed Spirit User laughed again.
“Ha ha ha... If possible, I'd rather win easily, no?”
For a while, the road ahead would be arduous. Onijūrō steeled herself to that resolve.

“Still awake?” Onijūrō flung open the sliding door to the earthen-floored room. The foot soldier barracks lining one corner of the bailey were his lodging for the night. Over five hundred soldiers were stationed within the castle walls. Nagamori had arranged this lodging specifically so Onijuro wouldn't have to sleep near Chizuru tonight.
Honestly, it felt like she'd been shooed away. Onijuro's trust had been shattered by the incident earlier that day. She'd been blatantly distanced from Chizuru's side, but for tonight only, Onijuro resolved to endure it.
Stepping onto the tatami mat, the exorcist called out to the inner kitchen.
“What are you cooking, Matashiro?”
“Grass porridge... I thought Hōzōin-sama might need it...”
“For that rotten bastard? That drunkard thief? That pervert's foster mother?”
"...That's going too far. Well, there's also a portion for you, Master... You were with Jakotsumaru-san, weren't you?” Saying this, the boy carried in an earthen pot. Inside the already boiling pot were mixed in some unidentifiable green things. But the smell only heightened Onijūrō's hunger. The exorcist busily stirred the porridge she'd ladled into a bowl with her chopsticks.
“Stop fussing over things you shouldn't. It's not very childlike.”

“What? You saw me?”
“I meant to invite you to supper, but I thought it might be intrusive...” Onijuro snapped irritably, but her expression softened the moment she tasted the porridge. Without restraint, she slurped it noisily, her mouth opening wide against the heat.
“Delicious... Just as good as ever.”
“You always praise my cooking.”
“Can't be helped. You, your sword skills are utterly hopeless.” After saying that, Onijuro reflected on her usual coarse manner. Even as a jest, it wasn't something to say to a disciple who had waited for him until this late hour. Beside him lay the futon he had been lying on earlier, neatly folded. Slowly setting down her chopsticks, the exorcist straightened her posture.
“...No, I'm sorry. I must apologize to you again today. I'm sorry about this afternoon.”
“Wh-what happened, Master?”
“While guarding Princess Chizuru, I... failed in my duty. Had Jakotsumaru not been there, who knows what might have become of the princess's life.”
“Master...”
"What good is being the continent's greatest exorcist? Saved from danger by a spirit user that I despise, who tried to slay me... I have no face to show the princess."
Seeing her anguished expression, Matashiro asked softly.
“Do you still dislike Jakotsumaru?”
“What do you think?”
“I don't think he's a bad person. And his skill with using cursed spirits must be considerable.”
Onijuro agreed. He was certainly not someone to be despised. If we know he's not an enemy and he'll cooperate, he could be a strong ally. Hōzōin is the same. They're both trustworthy to that extent.
But...
“What I hate is myself.”
“But...”
“Think about it. We're getting a thousand ryo. I can't possibly believe I'm doing work worthy of that.” She laid bare his true feelings. Onijuro desperately needed to voice her regret over his blunder.
But Matashiro objected. The boy's hand gripped Onijuro's hem tightly. “What are you saying! Isn't this where our master will be working from now on!” Shouting loudly, Matashiro added more rice porridge to the well. "We're still far from Sanzu! Before we get there, the enemy will surely attack again! Master should just cut them down!"
“You're right... You're absolutely right.”
“I don't want to see a weak-hearted Master! Be strong! Fight with strength!” Nodding at herdisciple's encouragement, Onijuro downed her bowl. She felt pathetic even to herself, yet now, Matashiro's words felt strangely comforting. As she filled his empty stomach, the demon hunter reignited her deadly conviction.
(Kizu's Black Crane... a worthy opponent indeed... Next time... next time, I will surely take him down with my own hands...)

Onijuro continued to devour the grass porridge, her thoughts fixed on her resolve. Her intensity was such that she didn't even notice the sliding door to the earthen-floored room opening. The visitor reluctantly addressed the greedy figure from behind.

“My apologies for the late hour...” Kanbee bowed his head quietly to the master and disciple who turned around.

The castle town was teeming with troops. Sakakibara family banners formed a procession flowing down the road, where morning mist still lingered. Units gathered from surrounding fortresses merged seamlessly, transforming into one massive formation.

Amongst that formation was the wedding procession that had departed from Sagino Castle, but the total force was vastly different from the day before. Thanks to the hastily assembled escort unit—a motley mix of cavalry, musketeers, spearmen...—the procession had swelled to over ten times its original size.

“Master! What is the meaning of this?!” Amidst the vast procession of over two thousand... Matashirō's complaint echoed. A small face peered out from the palanquin bearing the governor's family crest. The boy shouted hoarsely at his master, who was running alongside the palanquin.

“What exactly is my role here?!”

“You're a slow learner, aren't you? As I just said, starting today, we're using two palanquins.”

Snorting, Onijuro pointed calmly behind them. Sure enough, far ahead in the procession, another identical palanquin swayed along. The exorcist's finger guided her disciple precisely.

“In the rear palanquin rides Lady Chizuru. She is, so to speak, the main target. As for your palanquin, which leads the way... well, it's a decoy.”

“Why am I the decoy?! Who came up with this plan?!”

“Lord Kanbee... and... me.” Onijuro declared casually. “It was a plan discussed last night at the townhouse after you went to sleep. Reflecting on yesterday's attack, we concluded the escort numbers were still too thin... Lord Kanbee gathered troops during the night.”

“But the number of attendants for the procession was fixed...”

The exorcist cut off his disciple mid-sentence with a laugh.

“Only to the provincial border. Once we enter Zenshu Province, we return to the original numbers. Preparing the decoy was also part of the plan to deceive the enemy. Matashiro, I'm counting on you.”

“That's not fair! You didn't consult me at all!”

“If I had consulted you, you would have refused, wouldn't you?”

“Well, yes, I suppose...”

Ignoring his discontented disciple, Onijūrō slammed the palanquin door shut. “In any case, absolutely do not show your face! If you're discovered, you'll die as my substitute!”

“M-Master!” His pleas fell on deaf ears. Onijuro felt not a shred of last night's weakness or gratitude toward his disciple. The exorcist looked up at the brightening morning sky, her face impassive. Then, abruptly...

“What a terrible thing to do...” A carefree voice fell on her back. Onijuro glanced over briefly and clicked her tongue bitterly.

“What is it? You two...”

“Good morning, Onijuro-sama!” With a sharp greeting, Jakotsumaru stepped alongside the exorcist. Behind him, Hozoin, reeling from a three-day hangover, followed.

“Ugh... Onijuro-sama, your spirit seems particularly high this morning, ey?”

“If you can tell that, then I suppose I'm still young? That's none of your business, nun.”

“If you understand, then it's fine. Ahh... my head is pounding...”

With a smile, Jakotsumaru scanned the road ahead and behind.

“Still, what an incredible number of people! How did they all gather in just one night...”

“Bah, it's but a drop in the bucket compared to Unshu's total forces. More importantly, you stay with the main force!” Quickening her pace, Onijuro began to pull away. “I alone am sufficient as bait. You stay with Kanbee-san and guard the real Lady Chizuru's palanquin!”

But Jakotsumaru glanced back and shook his head. “The main targets are Nagamori-sama and Kanbee-sama, no? It's no fun hanging around them too much...”

“Would it be fun with me, then?!”

“Yes, in many ways. Besides, if only the main targets have guards, it'll be obvious who they are. I'd like to walk with you for a while.”

The exorcist's eyes flashed sharply with alertness. Even while walking, she showed no openings whatsoever. Keeping a moderate distance, Onijuro cleared her throat.

“What do you want to know, you?”

“First, this large number of people.” Jakotsumaru approached the exorcist with a pleased look. “Do you think you can win just by having more people?”

“We don't intend to win. If Kurotsuru appears, everyone becomes the princess's human shield. Buying time is enough.”

“H-How cruel!”

“That is the samurai's duty. Buying time sometimes reveals an opening. Extra manpower is always better.”

“Then what about the decoy?”

The cursed spirit user tapped Matashiro's palanquin lightly.

“Surely you don't think such childish tricks could lure the Black Crane?”

“But there's no other way...” As she spoke, Onijuro let out a weary sigh. The exorcist fixed her gaze on Jakotsumaru for the first time, her true feelings beginning to show. “We've rigged the palanquin. But it's merely a comfort. After all, we're facing the cursed spirit Kurotsuru. Who knows what tricks he'll pull? Honestly, there's no real solution.”

“So we're just playing defense? How painful...”

“Ultimately, whether we increase the guards or prepare a decoy, the situation won't change. But even if it's just a comfort, if it brings Lady Chizuru peace of mind, even a little, that's enough.”

Onijuro glanced back at the palanquin behind them. Jakotsumaru followed her gaze and offered a faint smile.

“You're being considerate, aren't you, Onijuro-san?”

"Yes, for Lady Chizuru. I must avoid anything like yesterday, where the enemy came so close." The exorcist's eyes held a tender light. The princess, untouched by the world, had witnessed her retainers killed before her eyes. By the hideous puppets, no less. The wound to her heart could not be shallow.

(I cannot let her feel that again.)

Jakotsumaru clearly sensed the exorcist's prayer-like wish. Unwittingly, even the cursed spirit user found his thoughts drifting to the unseen Chizuru.

“Must you marry at such cost?”

“There is no choice. It is to bind the nation together.”

“All princesses are the same, aren't they...”

“But Lady Chizuru... she is still fortunate...” Onijuro's voice softened slightly. “I hear she's known the young lord of Zenshu since childhood. She's not marrying against her will.”

“I'd like to meet her... Princess Chizuru... Have you met her, Onijuro-san? Seen her true self?”

“Ah, yes. But what do you think?” Asking this, the exorcist quickened her pace.

“If you can meet that princess and remain unperturbed... then you're quite the cursed spirit user yourself.”

“What... do you mean by that?”

Jakotsumaru's gaze locked onto Onijuro. Yet, he stopped without a word, watching over the palanquin behind him. The curse spirit user still did not know the true face of the princess at the center of the whirlwind.

“It's fine to be lost on the journey. Not yet...” Muttering, Onijuro resumed walking. The procession made its way along the highway...

“This is a troublesome spot...” Jakotsumaru couldn't help but voice his thoughts aloud. A narrow gap appeared between the rock faces closing in from both sides. The road ahead vanished into that crevice. A thick, white mist rose from the surrounding rock shadows. Pinching his nose against the pungent odor filling the air, the Cursed Spirit User remarked. “Why are we going through here? I smell something under your arm!”

“No, it's the stench of rotten eggs, you fool!” She shouted, scowling. The procession had reached the entrance to Daikokudani, shrouded in the smell of sulfur. It was the only route to cross the Nōjō Mountains separating Unshū and Zenshū. Even at the foot of the dormant volcano, Mount Ogoe, it was an unavoidable route.

“Hey, what about your guardian?”

“Hōzōin-sama? She's with the rear pack mules.” Finally noticing, the exorcist glanced toward the rear of the line. There, the nun slumped limply against her horse's back. Exasperated, Onijūrō snorted. “Pathetic! What's the big deal about a little sulfur smell!”

“The guarding samurai look pretty miserable too. They say it's called the Valley of Corpses for a reason...”

“They're not trained hard enough!”

But the cursed spirit user showed no irritation. Covering his mouth and nose with a handkerchief, Jakotsumaru spoke in a muffled voice.

“She's like a mother to me. She found me abandoned at a nunnery and raised me. She can't hold her liquor, but she's a kind soul.”

“I see. So spending your childhood in a nunnery turns you into a fool like you. In my next life, I'll steer clear of nunneries too. I'll be careful.”

“And where did you grow up, Onijūrō-dono?” Jakotsumaru asked casually.

“Since when did you develop such a sinister suspicion? Surely not since you were old enough to understand?”

“No, surely that must be it.” The exorcist admitted it plainly, nodding. To the astonished Jakotsumaru, Onijuro flashed a sarcastic smile.

"I too was a child who never knew my parents. By the time I was old enough to understand, I'd been entrusted to my master, Bokuden."

“Then your parents...”

“They died soon after I was born. As a sacrifice to the village's guardian deity—a cursed spirit.”

Jakotsumaru was momentarily speechless. But at the exorcist's astonishment, Onijuro offered a faint smile. “It's a common tale. Villages unable to resist the demands of wicked cursed spirits... Besides, I never knew my parents' faces. I feel little regret over it.”

“But still...”

"That doesn't mean I forgive them. That's why... I became an exorcist. Only for orphans in the same situation as myself... Well, never mind. That's all there is to it."

Nonchalantly, Onijuro stamped her foot on the rocky ground as she spoke.

The continent is filled with cursed spirits. Beings born with the power to wield cursed spirits, other than humans. Some are good, some are evil. Knowing this, the two pursued diametrically opposed livelihoods.

(The one who slays cursed spirits and the one who wields them)

Since ancient times, their positions have been irreconcilable. But now, regardless, they must join forces.

As if sensing this thought, Jakotsumaru suddenly spoke up.

“We are complete opposites, aren't we...”

“So what?”

“Couldn't we... manage to work together somehow?”

The mountain sky was thick with white smoke. The sulfur concentration grew even stronger. Without pausing on the mountain road winding through the rocky peaks, Onijuro growled low. “That depends... on what we do together...”

“What?”

“Ah... If something happened that brought us together... it wouldn't be impossible.”

“Won't it happen, then?” Jakotsumaru stared at Onijuro. The exorcist, too, stared at the cursed spirit user.

“Can I join forces with you?”

“Well... if something happens.” But at Jakotsumaru's answer, Onijuro turned her face away.

“Hmph! Of course it's better if nothing happens! Don't speak such unlucky words!”

Crunch, crunch, the exorcist plowed through the rough path.

Refusing to give up, the cursed spirit user tried to cling to her back.

At that very moment...

“What the hell?!” Jakotsumaru screamed reflexively - but he wasn't the only one shaken. The entire long procession was tossed about by a tremendous shock, and screams echoed throughout the valley. A powerful earthquake. Holding back their reins on their rearing horses, Nagamori and Kanbee were tense.

“Th-that's...!” The rumbling still shook the valley. Small stones tumbled down from the cliffs on both sides. The procession's gaze focused on that sheer cliff. Onijuro, Jakotsumaru... Nagamori, Kanbee... Even Hōzōin lifted her heavy head. The samurai stared dumbstruck at the precipice. At the center of their gaze...

A right arm appeared.

From within the cliff face, a gigantic arm made of rock thrust out. Its sheer size seemed capable of crushing a house in one hand.

But the procession had no time for shock. A left arm followed, then legs on both sides. Finally, a monstrous head emerged, letting out a thunderous, heavy roar. The giant, encased in rock, caused the cliff face to collapse and leapt out onto the procession's flank.

The procession instantly fell into disarray. The neighing of horses and the cries of men mingled as panicked crowds collided. Not a single soul remained to meet it... The narrow gorge echoed with shouts and screams.

“Retreat! Retreat!” Nagamori raised his battle fan and lowered his voice. “Return the palanquin! Fall back!” His command was drowned out by the din. Yet the procession scattered, fleeing in disarray. The samurai showed no sign of resistance whatsoever.

Onijuro drew her cursed blade. “Don't retreat! You must not retreat!” Her body bounced like a ball as she leapt over the heads of those around her. Landing on a large rock overlooking the procession, Onijūrō bellowed in a sharp voice. “Advance! You must not retreat! If we stop here, we're trapped like rats in a bag! Guard the path for the palanquin!”

“Onijuro-dono!” Snaking his voice, Jakotsumaru pointed behind him. Step by step, the giant of rock began its deliberate advance.

Its immense legs crushed the straggling cavalry, the overlapping screams ending in brutal trampling. Then, suddenly, its arm plunged downward, aiming straight for Onijuro.

“Damn you!” Onijuro leapt vertically into the air. A fist like a small mountain slammed into the ground beneath her feet. One blow. One strike.

The footing at the very front was shattered in a single blow. Cutting through the air like a dragonfly, the exorcist leapt back.

“Master!” Matashiro screamed, his face emerging from the palanquin. The boy rushed forward, about to leap out. But Jakotsumaru pushed the impatient Matashiro back into the vehicle.

“You stay in the palanquin! Leave this to us!”

“But Master is...”

As their voices crossed, stones rained down in a hail. The giant blocking the road swayed its chalk-white body, red flashes flickering across its massive frame. Simultaneously, white steam billowed from parts of its body, still hot from the lava's heat.

Onijuro leapt like a swallow, her small body darting in for a bold strike. But with a speed unmatched by its bulk, the monster swung its fists left and right. The exorcist dodged the attacks with a series of leaps.

She couldn't even close the distance. Ignoring the exorcist, the giant stepped into the procession.

“We're going to be killed!”

“Get back! Weren’t you retreating?!”

“Run away, quick!”

The front of the procession fell into panic. The giant began slaughtering indiscriminately with its hands. Blood from the sacrifices spilled between the dry, rocky fingers. As soon as one strangled corpse was left, the next victim was seized. The procession instantly scattered, trying to escape the crushing fist.

“No! Run!”

“Ahh! Wait!” Finally, even Matashiro's palanquin bearers fled, trembling. Left behind with the entire vehicle, the boy's skull slammed against the palanquin's ceiling.

“Ow!” But Matashiro, who had cried out, had no time to endure the pain. Jakotsumaru swiftly dragged the writhing boy out of the palanquin.

“No choice! Matashiro, into the princess's palanquin!”

“What about you, Jakotsumaru-san?!”

“I'll break through with Onijuro-sama!” Dodging the panicked crowd, the two huddled together in the shadow of a palanquin. Jakotsumaru already clutched the crystal ball. The cursed spirit user's gaze was fixed on the giant's face.

“Do we stand a chance?”

“We fight even if we don't! The rear of the procession should still be under control. Protect the princess alongside Hōzōin-sama!”

“You're certain we can break through?”

Jakotsumaru gave a firm nod in response to the boy's question. “It's impossible for this many people to retreat through this narrow path. Tell Lord Kanbee to break through when the giant hesitates, even if it's dangerous!”

“Understood!” Matashiro pursed his lips and began retreating toward the rear. Meanwhile, Jakotsumaru prepared to hurl the crystal. The two stood back-to-back, focusing their awareness forward... At that very moment.

“Waaahhhhh!”

“Damn it!”

Their voices rose simultaneously. A scream and a cry of regret. But it wasn't only Jakotsumaru and his men who cried out. The fleeing samurai were also being attacked from an unexpected direction by fresh foes.

In that instant, it looked like a whip of flesh.

Pale, pink, flexible tentacles, tinged with a flesh-like hue, erupted from the ground. Not just one or two. They blew away the pebbles covering the road, striking the procession for roughly a town's length—hundreds of them.

And it wasn't just the front. At the rear of the procession too, whips undulated into existence. They attacked, pincering Chizuru's palanquin.

The tentacles' brute strength hurled horses aside. A mounted man struck down had his torso cleaved in two, entrails spilling as he fell. Humans struck by the swift blow had limbs torn off, collapsing in pools of blood.

“Kanbee, what is this?!”

“Bastards! So this is an ambush?!”

Kanbee instinctively reared back in his saddle. Already, the front third of the procession ahead was within enemy territory. Worse, the rear third had suffered the same fate. The screams of soldiers having arms torn off and bellies ripped open reached the young warrior's ears. Even Chizuru's palanquin was within dangerously close range.

“The palanquin first! The princess...!”

This assault had been unforeseeable for both Jakotsumaru and Matashiro. A sudden strike before his eyes sent Matashiro flying off the road. Though the attack only grazed his leg, blood spurted from his torn hakama. Staggering against the rocks, the boy lost consciousness.

But the flash that struck Jakotsumaru had darted into the cursed spirit user's embrace. By the time he realized it, the tip of the whip was already dancing before his eyes. There was no time to dodge. From his right shoulder to his chest, from his chest to his left hip, the enemy sliced Jakotsumaru down in a diagonal cut. The cursed spirit user recoiled, rolling backward at the sight of his own blood splattering through the air.

“Onijuro-sama!” The body that cried out twisted violently and collapsed to the ground.

Amidst the flying shouts of rage, the exorcist snapped her gaze back at the call.

“Jakotsumaru!” The exorcist leapt, returning the shout.

Amidst steam, the giant's fist descended toward Onijūrō. Anticipating the attack at the last moment, the girl leapt across the boulder. Even in that instant, Onijūrō discerned the enemy's true form.

(I sense no cursed energy...!) The fist slammed into the ground, sending shards of rock flying in all directions. A deafening roar echoed. Dodging the flying debris, Onijuro focused her will on the giant.

(This one isn't a cursed god either... A puppet... Where is the puppeteer...? Where is the puppet master... He must be nearby...)

“Oni… Onijuro-sama!” Jakotsumaru screamed once more. Tentacles were wrapped around each of his fallen ankles. The demon roots began dragging the cursed spirit

user along, but Jakotsumaru had no strength left to resist. Clutching his blood-soaked chest, the cursed spirit user could only groan.

“Lend me your power! Twelve Heavenly Gods!”

Onijuro shouted, pinning her hopes on her own cursed energy. There was no time. The isolated exorcist, facing the approaching fist once more, glared at it. All the spiritual energy remaining within her body had already been drawn from her arms. Her cursed energy was concentrated. Her first and final strike. Seizing her chance, the exorcist uttered her spirit-word of resolve.

“Break the Demon... Retreat!” With a roar, a whirlwind danced across the rocky terrain.

The giant's advancing fist streaked past the earth at breakneck speed. Gravel flew like a torrential downpour, and dust swirled into a whirlwind-like height.

But Onijuro's body had charged head-on into that blow. The vicious punch was met swiftly by the exorcist's timing. Both charges collided directly - or so it seemed in that instant. The exorcist kicked off the ground, her lean, taut body shot skyward with divine speed. The fist missed Onijuro. The arm, striking empty air once more, sank wrist-deep into the ground. The exorcist did not miss that instant.

(Now!)

Onijuro landed on the right arm impaled in the earth. By the time the giant realized it, she was already scrambling up to the elbow. With footwork too swift for the eye to follow, the demon exorcist charged toward the giant's shoulder.

“Im-impossible!” Dragged across the rubble, Jakotsumaru could scarcely believe his eyes. As the giant scrambled to his feet, Onijuro had already reached his right shoulder. It was the recklessness of a mouse confronting a bear. The cursed spirit user braced himself for his own end, and that of the exorcist mouse.

But Onijuro felt no fear. Only the single-minded resolve to defeat her enemy burned within the thick swords gripped in both hands.

Holding her sword in a high guard, the exorcist streaked from the giant's shoulder toward its neck.

“Here I come!”

The giant's screech echoed with the tearing of fabric. Its left arm, reaching out, failed to seize Onijuro, then its right arm slammed down onto its own shoulder. But the exorcist effortlessly dodged the counterattack. However, as Onijuro closed in on its face, the monster finally unleashed a bloodcurdling scream of frustration.

“.....!”

The demon exorcist facing the giant leapt into the air at the last moment. What the monster's mouth expelled wasn't a scream - it was a flash of molten lava. The scorching vomit struck the rock face, its intense heat melting the cliff.

Onijuro dodged the fatal blow. Mid-air, she flung a throwing rope from her wrist. The steel cable, forged across the archipelago, coiled tightly around the giant's neck, suspending the exorcist in mid-air with no foothold. Then, in one swift motion...

The girl swung like a pendulum, cutting across his chest and leaping onto the giant's left shoulder. The monster's nape—it was right before her eyes. The demon exorcist, having severed the rope, kicked off the left shoulder and leapt, aiming for the back of its neck.

“Fukuden-ryu Heavenly Demon Secret Art.....!”

Onijūrō thrust his all-out strike. Only the tip pierced the solid rock face. Yet the blade, enveloped in light, sank deep into the bedrock. Crack! The air surrounding the exorcist exploded. Hair standing on end, Onijūrō pierced and shattered the giant's neck.

“...Secret Sword, First Strike!”

The monster was denied a death cry. There was no struggle. The immense destructive power of cursed spirits flowing from Onijuro's sword instantly permeated the

colossal body. The giant stiffened. Pulling his blade free, the exorcist leapt onto the left arm.

“Onijuro-sama!” Amid the chaos, Kanbee could only shout that.

But the next instant... the giant's skull exploded with a thunderous roar. Lightning bursting from within blew the remains to smithereens. The exorcist's single strike had brought the rock-like colossus to a halt on the road.

“Ha ha... Impressive... Ha... Ha...” In his fading consciousness, Jakotsumaru muttered like a delirious lunatic. Amidst the showering fragments of skull, the cursed spirit user sent a groan of admiration.

But already, Jakotsumaru was bound by the tentacles. Not just his legs, but his arms and neck were captured too. Feeling the final terror vaguely, the cursed spirit user reluctantly closed his eyes.

Then, to his ears...

“How long do you plan to sleep, you fool?!”

A sudden curse rang out. Startled, he opened his eyes. Before him, Jakotsumaru saw the flash of a white blade sweeping through the air. As the restraints slowly loosened, he shifted his body slightly.

“Y-you came, Onijuro-dono...”

“You're the one who called me! Stop whimpering like a child!” Unnoticed, the exorcist who had returned to the ground from the giant's left arm... was slicing through Jakotsumaru's cursed bonds. Aiming for the base of the whip, she swung her sword down without mercy. Severing the writhing tentacles one after another, Onijuro yanked the gasping cursed spirit user to his feet.

“It hurts! I'm... I'm injured, I am...”

“Shut up! Save your whining for later! You're the only one who can break through this!”

Giving a glance to the collapsed Matsushiro beside him, Onijuro gritted her teeth at the chaos in the procession. “Only your cursed spirit can take down this swarm of tentacles! I exhausted my spiritual energy with that last strike! I'm counting on you!”

“Why did you do that?! What are we supposed to do now?! How are we supposed to replenish our spiritual energy ahead...?”

“Only that cursed spirit can defeat such a massive enemy! There was no other choice!”

“Then... Onijuro-sama, you won't be able to use that technique again...”

“Enough! Just send out your summoned cursed spirits!”

As the exorcist shouted, fresh tentacles lunged at her. Splitting the earth, enemies swarmed Onijuro from all directions. But just before the blows landed, Onijuro's sword sliced through the flesh whips.

“Half will suffice, Jakotsumaru!” Onijuro swung her sword, shouting continuously.

“Just scatter those blocking the procession's path! Then we can get the princess out of here!”

“I... I understand, but...” Still fallen, the cursed spirit user twitched his right hand. Even the slightest movement of his arm sent searing pain coursing through his entire body. But Jakotsumaru held back his tears and somehow clenched the crystal ball.

“I beg you... Jushin Kamimai...” Summoning every ounce of cursed power, he poured his will into it. Instantly, the crystal orb streaked across the sky, targeting the tentacles restraining the samurai. Simultaneously, hundreds of paper fragments scattered from its center like a blizzard. Each was a white scrap of paper, roughly the size of a sheet of washi. The summoned cursed spirits had been unleashed from the crystal orb.

“Help meee!”

“...It hurts so much!”

Both samurai and foot soldiers at the front of the column had fallen to the enemy by the hundreds. Screams of being struck, torn apart, and strangled intertwined. Victims were dragged one after another into the depths of the earth.

Above them, confetti danced. With the sound of cutting through the wind, at lightning speed. The paper fragments plunging into the enemy sliced through the tentacles' trunks. Blades of paper. Moreover, dozens of blades swarming together, severing the tentacles with a single strike, then breaking off to launch another assault immediately. Like a school of fish seeking prey, the Cursed Spirit Paper Dance attacked the tentacles with flawless precision.

“Not bad, Jakotsumaru!” With that single word of praise, Onijuro leapt into the chaos. Severed tentacles spurted flesh-colored fluid as they collapsed to the ground. The exorcist pushed through the swirling dust, rushing toward the disoriented soldiers.

“The path is clear!” Lending a hand to the fallen, the exorcist bellowed in a harsh voice.

"Everyone, advance! Protect the path for Princess Chizuru! Those who can move, step forward!" But no one answered. The tentacles, repelled by Kamimai's counterattack, were slithering back underground. Yet even with the immediate threat gone, not a single soldier nearby could move properly. They were all frozen, trembling in terror. Shivering, Onijuro raised his sword and roared.

“You call yourselves samurai of the Sakakibara clan of Unshu?! Is there not one man here willing to die protecting the princess?! Show this exorcist how a samurai of Unshu dies!”

“Onijuro-dono!” A chorus of men and women called out to the exorcist. Two horses, kicking up dust, broke through the frantic chaos and burst forth from the rear. Her expression still grim, Onijuro turned to Kanbee and Hozōin.

“Oh! Are you all unharmed?!”

“That should be said to you, Onijuro-dono! Well done, slaying that giant!”

“The palanquin is safe too... Ugh! Where is Jakotsumaru?!”

Seeing the nun fighting nausea in the saddle, the exorcist quickened her tone.

“He's lying there! Matashiro too! The path is clear now, quickly, to Lady Chizuru's palanquin!”

“What of you, Onijuro-dono?!”

“The enemies behind the procession should still be unharmed! I'll go cut them down now!” Kanbee glanced behind him for an instant.

“Is it alright for us to proceed ahead alone?!”

“Don't worry about it! Leave the wounded behind! Jakotsumaru and I will bring them later! Just get the princess out of here now! Hurry!”

“Oni... Onijuro-dono, I'm counting on Jakotsumaru...!”

The demon exorcist nodded and bellowed again. “Those who cannot fight, clear the way! You're hindering the procession!”

Following this, Kanbee waved his hand wide behind him. Taking the young warrior's signal, the procession suddenly began to regain its discipline. The trembling soldiers stepped aside to the left and right, and from the rear, an unharmed squadron began to charge forward. They were the soldiers guarding Chizuru's palanquin.

“Onijūrō-dono, thank you!” With a single shout, Nagamori's horse galloped past. Onijūrō gave a quick nod of acknowledgment, then shifted her gaze to the black lacquered palanquin being pursued. The bearers were sprinting faster than usual. The small window of the palanquin opened for an instant, for Onijūrō.

“...Onijūrō!”

Their eyes met.

A faint voice called out to the exorcist.

The sound suddenly shook Onijūrō. It was a sweet, clear voice, full of tension—a sound she had forgotten to listen to for a while. The exorcist couldn't even respond in the moment. The palanquin, protected by the cavalry, continued on, racing past the giant's corpse.

“Keep going!” Onijuro snapped back to reality at Kanbee's command and glanced behind her. The procession was already moving to break formation. Ignoring the tentacles attacking from behind, the soldiers rallied together at Kanbee's voice. The chaos ended abruptly, and the procession found a way forward.

“Onijuro-dono, I'll go ahead!”

Kanbee turned his horse's head the moment he saw the rear guard.

“How can I ever thank you enough!”

“Thanks can wait until later!” The battle-frenzied exorcist raised her voice without meaning to - but Onijuro ignored it, looking up at Kanbee on horseback and shouting. “More importantly, I entrust the princess to you!”

“Of course!”

“There's no cursed spirit user here as skilled as Jakotsumaru! After we part ways here, the enemy might attack!” At that warning, Kanbee's expression changed instantly.

“What's wrong?!”

“N-no, you're absolutely right!”

Sensing the danger, the young warrior showed his panic. But Onijuro raised her voice, hoarse and encouraging. “Don't worry! We won't let them pass here!”

“I rely on you! Truly, I am grateful!” Kanbee tightened his lips and cracked his whip. From his galloping horse, the young warrior also shouted hoarsely.

“Don't die in vain! Survive!”

“We'll catch up before the next post station! Leave His Lordship to us!”

Their glaring eyes locked, then faded into the distance.

Watching the reliable samurai depart, Onijuro fixed hrt gaze on the approaching reinforcements. A bitter voice growled low. “Jakotsumaru, can you still do it?”

“I... I need a night's sleep to think it over...”

“Fool! It'll be too late then!”
“But I... I can't concentrate my cursed energy anymore...”
“Didn't you say we'd combine our power?!”
“Yes... Well... Maybe next time...” Lying prone, the cursed spirit user groaned softly. The cursed spirit paper dance had already lost the spiritual energy sent from Jakotsumaru and reverted to crystal. His wounds were too deep to wield further cursed spirits. Seeing the blood flowing onto the rocky ground, Onijuro abandoned any attempt at support.
“Hmph! I can handle this alone!” The road where the procession had raced was obscured by dust so thick it blocked the view ahead. From deep within that haze, a line of tentacles burst forth, tearing through the earth. Amidst the swarm of corpses and wounded, only Onijuro stood her ground.
“Don't... don't be reckless...”
“I must be reckless to win! Shut your mouth!”
Jakotsumaru's feeble encouragement reached her ears. Onijuro positioned her sword in a straight stance. The tentacles accelerated their charge. The exorcist, drained of spiritual energy, fixed herself squarely in the path of the fierce assault.
“I'm truly sorry I couldn't be of more help...”
Whispering, Jakotsumaru quietly closed his eyes.

In the darkness, a swarm of demonic energy writhed.
(…Have we arrived?)
(Hah. Safely at the Yobuki Inn. The procession fell into the trap at Daikokutani. As planned, the demons were separated from Chizuru.)
(What of the procession's guards?)
(Over fifteen hundred already. Yet they can offer no resistance. The jewel is now ours...)
(If only that exorcist weren't here. Surely she wouldn't catch up within this night....)
(No need for such concern. The inn at Nofuri is already protected by Mōren Dōji's barrier. Even if he came, he couldn't hinder our night attack.)
An oppressive thought... brought a smile to his lips.
(Within that barrier... we take the jewel.)
(Our long-held desire... it seems this will finally...)
(Failure is not an option. That is why I have gathered the full might of my clan here.)
The aura called out the names around it.
(Master Akari, are you here...?)
The clang of a staff answered.
(Nun Kasa, I count on you...)
With the rustle of robes, a smiling aura appeared.
(Barakki, work diligently...)
A breath like scorching wind echoed through the darkness.
(And Moggallana... all of you, use your subordinate lesser cursed spirits well. Take every single one of the fifteen hundred lives. Show no mercy. All of them, from long ago...)

A swarm of demonic energy began to stir restlessly. At its center, the dominant presence turned its gaze back once more.
(And now, the arm of your puppet... This time, there's no need to lose. Kill them all. The play is over.)
(Yes, I shall... to my heart's content...)
(Only you can take the jewel. Six hundred years were spent for this purpose. Prepare yourself.)
(I shall remember this well...)
The demonic energy dispersed. Yet, the dominant will remained utterly unmoved. The darkness continued to rumble. The starless void was the forbidden sky of another realm, far removed from the human world.

“Don't get so close! Everyone's watching!”
“I'm injured, you know… Be a little gentler...”
“No, our master is already being quite gentle.”
A pitiful group trudged along the twilight road. All were wounded. The soldiers abandoned at Daikokutani numbered about two hundred. Each had torn their own clothes to tend their wounds, somehow managing to follow the main force. They were a defeated remnant.
The Exorcist and the Cursed Spirit User were at the center of that line.
Jakotsumaru, having staunched his wounds, moved forward leaning on his master's shoulder. But whenever he staggered, the Cursed Spirit User inevitably leaned toward Onijuro. “You bastard, you're doing this on purpose...!”
“N-no, not at all!”
"Lying won't help, Jakotsumaru. Ever since a moment ago, you've been staring at Master's chest..." Matashiro remarked casually. In that instant, Onijuro's arm slammed the Cursed Spirit User onto the ground.
“Ow, ow, ow!” But even the ear-splitting scream didn't make the surrounding wounded soldiers turn their heads. This same scene had repeated itself for over two hours now. Yet without tiring, Onijuro continued to roar in rage.
“Even at a time like this, you're only concerned with lust!”
“No, I just saw a lovely cleavage and couldn't help...”
Onijuro clutched her own chest tightly. “You bastard... So it wasn't just the young girl...!”
“Well, she is my type... But honestly, if someone's beautiful, age doesn't matter...”
“Enough flattery! Get back in line! Or I'll cut your head off!” But a boy had jumped onto the exorcist's back.
“Please stop, Master! This will only make Jakotsumaru-san's wound worse!”
“Then so be it! Let it worsen and kill him!”
“But I said we should work together...”
“Shut up! I can handle this alone!”
Snaking up weakly, Jakotsumaru exhaled deeply. Then he smiled brightly. “Still, what splendid development, Onijuro-dono?”
“What did you say?”

“I thought you were all hard muscle, but there are soft spots too, aren't there? I'm falling for you all over again.”
“You bastard—!”
“Huh? Are you blushing again?”
For a moment, Onijuro's rage-shaken strength shook off the boy's restraint and lunged for her sword hilt. Matashiro was on the verge of despair.
Then...
“We can see the inn—!”
“We've reached the Nofuri Inn—!”
A shout rang out from the front of the line. The Cursed Spirit User brightened even more, patting Onijuro's shoulder. “Oh, oh! Looks like we're finally here!”
“You... are your wounds truly hurting...?”
“Well... the joy of reaching the inn, combined with the joy in Onijuro-dono's chest... it's completely...”
“That's good... then!” A furious front kick sent Jakotsumaru crashing into the bushes. As if nothing had happened, Onijuro strode past the line of wounded.
“Where? Can you see any lights?”
“Yes, sir... over there...!”
A young man with his arm in a sling pointed ahead. The road plunged steeply downhill, leading straight into a hollow between the mountains. Lights from houses were indeed visible in the narrow mountain village. Looking up at the first star, Onijuro breathed a sigh of relief.
“We made it before nightfall, somehow.”
"No one fell behind from Daikokudani to here. It seems we've fulfilled our duty safely..."
At Matashiro's words, the exorcist also caught her breath.
“Good. You go ahead to the inn. I'll ask Lord Kanbee to lend us some men.”
“You're going to transport them, sir? Understood!”
"Um... I... ..."
“What? You're still here?”
Unfazed by the hostile glare, Jakotsumaru pressed close behind the exorcist.
“Hey, I still can't walk. Please, lend me your shoulder.”
“Forget it! Walk on your own!”
“Onijuro-dono's warmth... I'll never forget it...”
“Say another word and I'll make you ×××.....!”
“You really mean that, Onijuro-dono.....?”
But without answering, the exorcist abruptly quickened her pace. She strode on without a glance back. Refusing to be left behind, Jakotsumaru desperately tried to cling to her back.
The two of them walking in step...
“Huh?”
“What's that...?”
He stopped abruptly. Hearing the voices, the surrounding soldiers halted too. The group's gaze focused straight down at the post station below.

For just a few seconds, the Exorcist and the Cursed Spirit User shared the same line of sight. It didn't take long to assess the situation. Jakotsumaru's face instantly drained of color. Realizing what was happening, Onijuro reflexively clenched her fist.

“Matashiro, RETURN!” Her thunderous voice echoed down the road ahead. Turning to her disciple, Onijuro bellowed in urgent tones.

“Enemy! A cursed spirit! Come back!”

“Huh? What did you say?”

“Look closely! The sky above the post town!”

At that, Matashiro pulled a pocket telescope from his robe. But confirmation was unnecessary. Whatever Onijuro and the others had recognized had already swollen to a size plain for anyone's naked eye to see. Above the center of the post town, something hung in the sky directly overhead.

It looked like fireflies...

But the lights were gradually transforming into a gigantic sphere. The round, orange-hued, eerie light soon began to swallow the inn town, sinking into the hollowed-out valley between the mountains. Before their eyes, the hemispherical light enveloped the entire inn town. Voices of astonishment began rising from the samurai gathered around.

“What on earth is that...!”

“The Wild Wind Inn is gone...”

“What happened to the princess?!” Jakotsumaru muttered discontentedly.

“We've been had... It's clearly a barrier...”

“Can you gauge the scale of the cursed spirit?”

“Probably four or five hundred spirit energy consumption. A high-ranking cursed spirit.”

Onijuro clicked her tongue at the cursed spirit user's analysis. If the estimate was correct, this was a formidable foe. “You... can you handle it?”

“My spirit energy is still sufficient. But the problem is whether I can concentrate my cursed power. More importantly...” Snaking his slender fingers over the wound, Jakotsumaru flashed an anxious look. Onijuro understood exactly what he meant.

“Don't worry about me. Even without a cursed spirit, I should manage somehow.”

“Is this enemy that easy to deal with...?”

"Even if my spirit energy runs dry, I still have cursed energy. A power I've honed and refined since birth, with all my might. If it comes down to it, I'll cut through a spirit body with sheer willpower alone."

“Relying solely on guts? That's rough...”

“And what if you can't activate your cursed spirit...? What then?”

“Yes. I understand.” The exorcist and the cursed spirit user locked eyes.

“We must act, or the princess will be in danger...”

“That's right! Let's go!” Onijuro scanned the area around her. Anxious gazes watched the two intently. The exorcist met their expectations with a defiant smile.

“Everyone, wait here! I will definitely rescue Princess Chizuru safely! Excuse me!”

With only those words, she dashed off. The agile black-clad figure sprinted through the dark road like a hare escaping.

“Master, I too...!” But Matashiro, who shouted, clumsily failed to keep up. Onijūrō shoved her disciple aside as she hurried ahead, leaving only a tear in her robe fluttering in the darkness.

“Stay behind! You're useless with a sword!”

“That's... unreasonable!” Ignoring the pathetic plea, the exorcist headed straight for the inn. Matashirō found himself frozen on the road. But suddenly, on his stunned shoulder...

“Whoa! What the hell?!”

“P-please, Matashiro... lend me your shoulder...”

Jakotsumaru was already leaning heavily on the boy.

“Honestly, you're hopeless...”

“Please, to the inn town. With Onijuro-dono alone... this battle is impossible. Hurry!”

With conviction, Jakotsumaru gazed down at the inn town. Already, the Cursed Spirit User had noticed the thousands of demonic energies swirling within the eerie light, steeling himself for a fierce battle.

“This is...”

As they neared the post station, Onijuro lowered her eyes. The continuously glowing hemisphere was far larger than anticipated. The spherical surface, towering like a castle wall, pulsed with a distinct, steady beat. Drawing her sword, the exorcist released a warning aura around him. Before her very eyes...

The hemisphere revealed its true form.

Gradually, the light faded, and the sphere became transparent. Countless eyeballs were attached to its crystalline membrane. Each fist-sized orb was densely packed, all facing outward. Thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, of eyes swirled across the sphere's surface, continuing their horrifying writhing.

“Onijuro-dono, this is...!”

“Don't come any closer!” Without turning to the voice that had caught up, Onijuro concentrated her will even further. Then, her gaze reached the transparent barrier. Unconsciously, the exorcist tightened her grip on the sword.

(What on earth is this...!)

A despairing groan nearly escaped her throat. Both Jakotsumaru and Matashiro, rushing forward, were speechless at the glimpse of the scene within. What spread across the post town was a veritable hellscape.

The post town was engulfed in vicious flames.

Dozens of houses clustered around the highway were all burning to the ground. The heat and black smoke were trapped within the barrier. As a result, the thick, black smoke filled the streets, gradually obscuring their vision.

But what was happening was clear. Corpses of samurai piled up by the roadside. Gruesome pools of blood spilled onto the ground. And countless black, monstrous creatures darting about as if reveling.

The exorcist's teeth chattered. The tremor in her chest wouldn't stop. Gritting her back teeth as if to suppress the rising fury, Onijūrō clenched her jaw.

“You filthy bastards...!” The exorcist readied her sword and charged headlong into the barrier. A strike born of rage. The blade swung down from above seemed poised to cleave through the wall of eyes. But.... ..

“Master!” Matashiro rushed over swiftly. The resilient barrier deflected the charge, sending Onijuro flying. The boy clutched the staggering exorcist's back tightly.

“Don't worry! I'm fine!”

“This is bad! What should we do?” Sniffing at the wound, Jakotsumaru frowned. The eyes darted about erratically, blinking repeatedly as if to mock him. The exorcist gritted her teeth and sharpened her gaze.

“Can your cursed spirits do anything about this?”

“It'll be fine! It does consume quite a bit of spiritual energy, though. Now, move aside!”

“No! Stop it!” Onijuro grabbed the cursed spirit user's sleeve. At that voice, Jakotsumaru bared his fangs.

“Why?! Everyone's inside this barrier! Hōzōin-sama, Kanbee-sama... and above all, the Princess! If we get inside, we can figure out how to save them! Right now, we just need to break this barrier!”

“...No, that's too hasty.” Onijuro lowered his voice calmly. “What if, after losing their spiritual energy, whoever cast this barrier uses the same cursed spirits again? Then we'll have no way to get inside at all!”

Hearing this, Jakotsumaru's hand stiffened until it turned white. He had no reply. Ashamed of his own impatience, the cursed spirit user tried to steady his breathing and calm his agitation.

“Then are we just going to sit here and do nothing?!” This time, Matashiro pointed at the barrier. His extreme agitation erupted into a tear-filled, angry shout.

“Look! They're all dead! If we don't hurry, every last one of them will be killed!”

“Calm down, Matashiro! There must be something we can do...!”

“Ah, there is a way. A sure way.” The exorcist had already sensed the powerful cursed energy lurking nearby and was ready for battle. Jakotsumaru's gaze pierced straight through Onijuro.

“What is that way! Tell me quickly!”

“It's simple. Without cursed energy, a cursed spirit cannot be sustained. The one maintaining the barrier...” In that instant, Onijuro leapt. “...Just take them down!”

“Over here, Jakotsumaru-san!”

A split second later, Matashiro also lunged sideways, shoving the cursed spirit user aside. The strike aimed at the three was dodged at the last moment, and the unoccupied ground exploded. Gritting his teeth against the searing pain, Jakotsumaru rolled into a harvested field.

“Come out! You're the minions of Kizu's Black Crane, aren't you!” In response to Onijuro's demand, a whirlwind of laughter answered. Men's laughter, women's laughter. Old men's laughter, children's laughter. Hundreds of unhinged laughs washed over the area like ripples.

Then suddenly...

Eyes appeared in the sky. Naturally, not just one or two. Countless eyeballs, from pea-sized to as large as watermelons, floated up from the darkness and began darting at breakneck speed above Onijuro's head.

“Onijuro-dono... this is...”

“I know. Be quiet...”

The two cursed spirit users were already sensing the enemy's immense cursed energy. And the considerable amount of spiritual energy it had gathered.

Soon, the swarm of eyeballs coalesced into a single mass, whipping up a small tornado on the road. Jakotsumaru turned her face away from the surging gale, but only Onijuro steadfastly fixed her gaze on the enemy's form.

“Quite the grand entrance. Are you the master of this barrier?”

(That's right. I'm Mōren Dōji.) A child's voice, devoid of tension, answered. Onijūrō and Jakotsumaru rose to their feet on either side of the road.

From the center of the road, the heart of the whirlwind, the voice's owner stepped forward. A boy with his hair tied in a topknot, clad in a white suikan. His attire was from ancient times, before the unification of the continent.

“So you cast this barrier...”

(That's right, Aoi Onijuro-san)

“Sorry, but your cursed power is getting in the way. You'll have to vanish here.”

Moren Dōji smiled at Jakotsumaru's words.

(If I could. But I doubt it's possible.)

“How did you know?”

(You lack spiritual energy, exorcist.)

The young cursed spirit user saw right through her.

(I'm not weak enough to be defeated without my cursed spirit. And Mr. Jakotsumaru, you're not strong enough to defeat me alone either.)

A refreshing smile nodded to both of them.

(The people inside are already beyond saving. Give up.)

“Unfortunately, that's not in my nature...”

(Do you really think you can defeat Kurotsuru-sama?)

“Ah, I'd like to believe so.” As they spoke, the distance between Onijuro and Moren Douji closed. Jakotsumaru also sensed the shift. The invisible space between them collapsed in an instant...

“Master, back off!” Matashiro shouted.

But the exorcist had already leaped overhead. Moren Dōji's double-edged sword sliced through the air. His young eyes flashed purple for an instant. His swift strike dodged, the cursed spirit wore a cruel smile.

Jakotsumaru leapt back - flashes trailing from both arms struck Mouren Dōji by surprise. The cursed spirit user desperately concentrated his power.

“Capture Whip!” The cursed spirit's ropes coiled around Mōren Dōji. Feeling resistance, Jakotsumaru began to tighten the bindings.

But it was too late. Mōren Dōji formed a seal with one hand, releasing a short burst of heat. Simultaneously, the cursed spirit's ropes snapped away. Sprinting in one breath, the demon child closed in before Jakotsumaru's eyes.

“No, nooooo!” The panicked cursed spirit user had no time to counter. Moren Dōji, his gaze shifting to green, swung his sword to strike at the opening, but Onijūrō intervened. The exorcist, falling from the air, plunged into the space between them, locking her tachi in a perfect straight line. A sharp metallic clang rang out. The exorcist caught Moren Dōji's strike with a sharp clang, baring white fangs.

“Don't make this difficult... you damn brat...!”

(Even without cursed energy, you’re a renowned exorcist...)

His smiling eyes flashed gold. The form of the youth with soft white skin appeared beautiful at first glance. Yet his merciless sword strokes were those of an emotionless executioner.

(Tsukahara Bokuden... He lives up to his master's name... Possessing terrifying cursed energy...)

“So are you saying you cannot win?”

(You're quick to understand. That is correct.)

Jakotsumaru silently stepped back from the two. Understanding, Onijuro called out.

“...Yes, you should step back further... Jakotsumaru.”

“B-but this guy... he's not someone I can defeat without my cursed spirit! I'll take his place!”

There was no way to slay a cursed spirit except by cursed energy. That meant there was no chance of victory for Onijuro, whose spiritual energy was depleted. In fact, she likely wouldn't even land a single blow.

But... Onijuro shook her head. She had no intention of retreating. She strained her cursed energy into her body, and the girl roared from the depths of her being.

“Defeating cursed spirits is my job! Leave this to me!”

(Heh heh heh... If only it were that easy...) Before she could finish, Mōren Dōji leapt. Sensing the danger, Jakotsumaru also stepped back. Moren Dōji parried Onijūrō's sword, flicking her water-repellent robe. Then suddenly, he leapt straight up. He flew over Onijūrō, aiming for Jakotsumaru... but the exorcist kicked off the ground too. Sword and blade collided midair, sending fierce sparks flying.

“Over here, Jakotsumaru-san!” Matashiro's angry shout drew Jakotsumaru closer. The tumbling pair dashed into the shadow of a roadside rock. As the exorcist landed, Jakotsumaru raised his head. A murderous intent hung taut over the highway.

The two blades facing each other did not move an inch. Both Onijuro and Mōren Dōji twisted their mouths. At that very moment... both figures staggered.

Blood spurted from Onijuro's right shoulder.

Mokuren-doji's water-resistant robe was slashed diagonally.

Their bodies swayed violently, revealing expressions of agony.

“J-Jakotsumaru-san...!”

“O-Onijuro-sama...!” “Master!” At the overlapping cries, the exorcist nodded.

“Don't worry, it's just a scratch...!” Onijuro, pressing her wound, smiled grimly. “Besides, if it's a wound, his is deeper... Look...”

At her words, Jakotsumaru and Matashiro's gazes shifted.

Matashiro's trembling hand gripped the cursed spirit user's sleeve. But even Jakotsumaru couldn't suppress his own shudder.

(You did it, you exorcist...!)
Moren Douji discarded the boy's voice. Then, suddenly, he tore off his split-collar robe and undergarment. Exposing his bare upper body, the cursed spirit readied his sword once more.
(To sever a spirit form with only the power of cursed energy... with only the sheer will to cut... you... truly are the continent's foremost exorcist...)
The boy's growling body... was covered in countless blinking eyeballs. From his neck to his arms, from his chest to his abdomen, a dense swarm of eyes clung to him.
Clearly etched upon his chest was Onijūrō's strike. It had severed several eyeballs, the wound deep and tearing through his chest. “Your master is...”
Stunned, Jakotsumaru was speechless. Matashirō clenched his fist and nodded firmly.
“...Yes, she truly is the continent's greatest exorcist!”
That exorcist...
...continued to stare down Mōren Dōji. Don't rely on cursed spirits. Slay the enemy with your own spiritual energy alone. It was precisely because of her master's words that Onijūrō could exhaust her spiritual energy without hesitation.
“What's wrong? Your cursed power is waning...”
(You insolent human...)
“Dismiss your barrier cleanly. Then I won't take your life.”
(How could I trust a human's words?!)
At Onijuro's words, Mouren Douji's violet eyes flashed fiercely.
(The lies the Sakakibara family told Kurotsuru-sama, and now this scheme to smuggle the Bead of Adoration to another country... How could Kurotsuru-sama ever forgive them...!)
Then, Jakotsumaru stepped out from behind a rock. “Wait a moment! What lies are you talking about?!”
(That is the sin! The sin of forgetting the lies, of erasing them!)
“Isn't Kurotsuru's target the Mijū?!”
(Of course it is! But it was you humans, the Sakakibara family, who stole that Mijū, wasn't it?!)
Moren Dōji's eyes, now intensely filled with rage and killing intent, closed in sharply on the exorcist's range.
(You who aided in the plot... I will not forgive you either...!)
“Not my concern...” Regardless, Onijūrō readjusted her sword stance. “We'll hear the details from someone later. Right now, cutting you down and breaking through this barrier is our priority.”
Moren Dōji's eyes turned a venomous crimson, the corners of his mouth curling up in a sneer.
(Come on... If you think you can cut this Mōren down!)
"Wait!!” Jakotsumaru's voice failed to reach her for an instant. No, even if it had, it would have been futile.
The exorcist, sword drawn, lunged straight into Moren Douji's embrace. The cursed spirit, forming seals, took a step...
(Slashing Light Wheel!)

The moment he shouted, three gleaming wheels, each as large as a platter, suddenly leapt into the void. A shrill, ear-splitting roar rent the air. Moren Dōji's attack spirits charged toward Onijūrō all at once. But the exorcist's sword flashed upward from below. One strike shattered the leading light wheel, then spun sharply to cleave the next attack in two. But the final attack closed in before Onijuro's very eyes. Simultaneously, Moren Douji leapt. He thrust his sword straight in, and the cursed spirit roared like a wild beast.

“Onijuro-dono!”

“Master!”

Cries of support rang out. Yet, drowning out the cheers, Onijuro too thundered forth the demon god's word-spirit.

“Break the Demon's spell!” The exorcist's left hand left the tachi. The instant it did, she had already drawn the wakizashi at her waist. Wielding that short but thick blade, Onijuro halted Moren Dōji's strike.

(You bastard!) The cursed god roared. In that instant, the exorcist swung her tachi with one hand, cleaving the third halo of light. Enraged beyond measure, Mōren Dōji ignored the dagger and thrust his sword forward. The blade, ignited with cursed spirit light, forced aside resistance and sank into Onijūrō's side.

(You human scum, daring to pull such a stunt!)

Bathed in Onijūrō's spurting blood, Mōren Dōji fixed his gaze on the exorcist. Onijuro gritted her back teeth. The cursed spirit was certain of victory.

But then... Onijuro swept her blade sideways. It sliced through Merendouji's eyes, the white blade flowing swiftly. Covering his face with his hands, the cursed spirit staggered backward.

“My apologies, but you lose...!” Then, thrusting her wakizashi into the boy's throat, the exorcist growled hoarsely. “I'll let you pass through the barrier. Don't take it personally...!” A flash of light exploded. Instead of blood, his spirit body scattered, and Mōren Dōji's physical form vanished into the void. After the cursed spirit vanished, only a single, withered eyeball lay rolling on the ground.

Simultaneously, a thunderous roar echoed behind Onijuro. The apex of the hemispherical barrier enveloping the inn town was blown apart in a gruesome explosion. The writhing mass of eyes all closed their lids in agony, trembling.

The breach in the barrier instantly widened, and the translucent curtain dissipated like clouds. From within that rupture, flames, black smoke, and screams of agony erupted all at once.

“Splendid work, Onijuro-sama!”

“You signaled not to strike, yet you...” Snapped at, Jakotsumaru stammered in surprise.

“...Well, he seemed to know the situation. But as Onijuro-sama said, knowing that can wait. Truly, splendid work.”

“Enough flattery! We're going inside!” Shouting, Onijuro suddenly dropped to her knees. The wounds on her shoulder and side throbbed simultaneously. Crumbling, the exorcist collapsed face-down on the road.

“It's impossible, Master! With these wounds...”

“That's right! To fight on without treatment...” Jakotsumaru echoed the boy's words. Yet Onijuro gripped Jakotsumaru's arm, flashing a defiant smile.

“The pain is proof the wounds are shallow. What matters is...”

“No cursed spirits, your body's covered in cuts—this is beyond reckless! You should stay here!” But the exorcist's blood-stained arm refused to let go of Jakotsumaru. Clenching her grip, Onijuro steadied her swaying body.

“Worry about the princess more than me... This time it's your turn... Quickly, lend me your shoulder...”

Reluctantly, Jakotsumaru hoisted the exorcist's arm onto his shoulder. He had already forgotten his own wounds. The cursed spirit user held the girl tightly in his arms.

Matashiro led the way ahead of them. The three slowly made their way toward the inn town filled with scorching wind.

“Th-this is too much... this is...” The boy's voice choked. Along the roadside, members of the procession lay piled up, lifeless—both retainers and servants. There were also bodies that seemed to be maids and inn townspeople. Some had been slain by a sharp blade, others charred black. All were exposed in their gruesome deaths.

“Guh... We must find the main headquarters... Ugh!”

“It’s probably where the most corpses are. The guards should be thickest here... Dammit!”

Stepping over pools of blood, the group pushed toward the center of the post town. Choking on the stench of death and black smoke, Jakotsumaru covered his mouth with a handkerchief. The demonic energy swirling overhead barely registered now.

Soon, their gaze fell upon a particularly large merchant house. At its entrance, a black lacquered palanquin burned fiercely. Jakotsumaru and Onijuro's gazes locked. The house itself was now engulfed in the inferno. Scattered remains littered the ground, leaving no place to step.

“Master... surely not...”

“You stay here, Matashiro.”

“If anything happens, you'll let me know, right?”

Their intentions aligned. Jakotsumaru dragged Onijuro forward, concentrating his will within the flames.

“...Holy Purity Barrier Array.” Instantly, an invisible sphere enveloped them both. The enormous bubble gently rose upward. Within the barrier that blocked the heat and purified the air, Onijuro caught her breath for a moment.

“You're quite the handy one, a real lifesaver...”

“You've finally noticed my competence, haven't you?”

“Shut up, stay alert...” Onijuro gripped her sword, scanning the surrounding flames.

“I don't sense any strong cursed energy...”

“Right, but some trash is still lurking around...”

The barrier advanced from the depths of the mansion toward the annex. Mountains of corpses overflowed the tatami rooms, the earthen floors, and even the garden. Floating about a foot above the ground, the barrier pushed forward over the rows of remains. Suddenly, Jakotsumaru halted the barrier's progress.

“What the hell...? What is it...?”

“Lord Nagamori...” His pointing finger directed toward a corpse collapsed on the veranda. The bloated body of the elderly retainer had been severed cleanly in two at the chest. Torn-out entrails held the separated halves together. The upper body, covered in blood and still wielding a sword, lay on the veranda, while the lower half remained inside the tatami room. The remains of other samurai were scattered around.

“Lady Chizuru! Hōzōin-sama!” Beside the screaming Jakotsumaru, the exorcist silenced him with a single hand. But shifting her gaze into the room, Onijūrō clenched her fist. This was already the innermost part of the residence. The burning alcove still held beautiful candlesticks and dining utensils. Whose they were was obvious at a glance.

Then, suddenly...

“Th-this...” Jakotsumaru’s mouth trembled as he noticed something. Instantly breaking the barrier, he picked it up, puzzled.

Amidst the inferno, Onijuro was dumbstruck. It was indeed familiar... a rosary.

“Impossible. Their target was...”

“Their target was this, wasn't it? They left it behind...”

Hearing this, the cursed spirit user also scrutinized the rosary. Wasn't the conspicuous mirror stone the true target? “Then what exactly did the enemy...”

Black smoke and scorching heat lashed at their faces. Onijuro stared intently at the rosary in her palm. And when she suddenly lifted her gaze...

“.....”

Something nearly escaped Onijuro's lips. Jakotsumaru also whipped his head around.

“Onijuro-dono, what...!”

But without answering, Onijuro stepped into the flames. With slow, deliberate steps, the exorcist approached the lifeless body of a young warrior.

“Lord Onijuro, that place is on fire...!”

He started to say... but Jakotsumaru lost his voice too.

Unmindful of the inferno, Onijuro stared at Obata Kanbee. The body of Obata Kanbee, fallen as if guarding a corner of the room... The young warrior, slain by multiple sword wounds, lay with his eyes closed, gazing toward the ceiling. The demon exorcist silently looked down at his blood-soaked, handsome face.

Silently looking down...

A sharp pain shot through her fist.

Without realizing it, the prayer beads she clenched were nearly crushed in her hand.

Onijuro shifted her gaze to the crystal beads strung together.

The transparent beads reflected the fierce flames, and Kanbee's death face, stained with fresh blood... Onijuro turned to look behind her.

Jyakotsumaru stood there, flames at his back. His clear, trusting eyes fixed on the exorcist. “It's okay to cry, Onijuro-sama.”

The cursed spirit user said this, looking down, too, at Kanbee's remains. "Right now... it's okay to cry. No need to put on a brave front, no need to think about being an exorcist. I'm the only one here. Cry your heart out... then let's move forward."

(Why are you here...? When I... was about to lose the “usual” me... why? Why, in front of you, did I...?)

Just as those thoughts reached that point...

(Jakotsumaru's words seeped into my entire being. For some reason, my usual self felt like a hindrance. And what I had forgotten, what I had sealed away...)

Once more, pain shot through her fist.

Within the exorcist's palm, the Mijū was screaming. Only Jakotsumaru could understand it—it was the sobbing of a little girl...

【Chapter 4】

Even with eyes closed, the hellish scene wouldn't fade.

The color of raging flames. The pale, eerie light darting about. The vivid blood staining the floor and walls. The black smoke that swallowed everything.

Even covering her ears, the screams reached her.

The sound of feet fleeing in panic. Beast-like cries. Nagamori's death throes. Kanbee's final breath. An ominous, high-pitched laugh.

Chizuru huddled in the darkness. She believed that if she hugged her knees and kept her eyes tightly shut, this tragedy would end. But even as she shut out her senses, the voice kept calling to the girl.

(The Governor of Unshu's daughter... Chizuru, right...?)

It was a voice that could not be identified as belonging to a child, a young person, or an old person, nor could it be determined whether it was male or female. Chizuru desperately maintained the fetal position.

(Why has it come to this...? You cannot understand... But it is all... the sin of your father's generation... If you must blame someone, then blame the past...)

Chizuru's fist grasped at the air. Since childhood, she had never parted with it... That rosary was now gone. She had been taught that as long as she had the rosary, as long as she had the Mijū, no one could harm her.

(You must be anxious...)

The voice seemed to see right through her.

(But you still bear the protection of the Mijū. Even I cannot harm you. The very thought of hurting you fills me with dread. Its spiritual power is strong.)

“Th-then what do you want from me...” Chizuru managed only that before falling silent. Somewhere, she sensed a smile. In the darkness, the girl's body spun, drifting helplessly.

(I must have the Mijū at any cost... I must retrieve it while it remains in Unshū... But from those with a heart... from humans or cursed gods... it is impossible to take the Mijū...)

“What do you mean...?”

(.....)

“There are no prayer beads here! No charm either!”

(.....)

“What... what do you want from me?!”

Chizuru stared into the darkness. The endless, infinite blackness held no distinguishing features. Only profound darkness stretched on and on. From the deepest depths of that darkness...

Instead of an answer... a helpless sigh escaped. And it was definitely for both of them...

(.....I'm counting on you)

(Leave it to me...)

Chizuru stiffened at the new presence. Sensing this, the two voices edged closer in the darkness.

(The cursed power of Mōren Dōji has vanished...)

(Then surely not...)
(Those two you informed us of... they're quite skilled...)
(To win without cursed spirits... We were careless.)
Yet a calm, composed presence stirred.
(Well, they won't be much of an obstacle. They'll never find this place... Go ahead.)
(There's no chance of breaking through this encirclement.)
(Your wish will finally be granted...)
(Hah, so this will avenge my grudge...)
(Settle it. Settle Meiju's grudge...)
Stunned, Chizuru opened her eyes. “That voice... You...!” Her lips, about to speak, suddenly froze. Tongue and teeth refused to move. Pressure gripping her throat twisted Chizuru's slender body grotesquely.
(You must not make a sound...)
A new presence declared.
(If I hear that voice, even I...)
(My resolve to take the Princess's life will falter...)
(Bear with it for a moment, just until the end...)
Pale blue flames swarmed around Chizuru. At the center of the ring of fire, the girl covered her ears again.
(Extract the charm bead from Chizuru's body...)
(I cannot do it, but you can...)
(Your puppet should be able to...)
(If it's a puppet without a heart...)
The voice gradually faded away. Chizuru, watching the dancing flames, eventually lost consciousness herself. It all happened in that abyss, in the endless darkness.

“The bleeding's stopped.”
“My apologies, Matashiro...”
Whispering softly, Onijuro tucked her sleeves back over her bare arms. In the quiet night woods, the chirping of insects and the murmurs of the wounded echoed. The exorcist cleared her throat and glanced behind him.
“It's fine now. Turn around.”
Jakotsumaru, his treatment finished, was playing with his prayer beads. “Do you really not want to show your skin that much?”
“Of course not. You're a man, after all.”
“Then what about Yatsushiro-kun?”
“He's still a child.” She adjusted his kimono without enthusiasm. Jakotsumaru stared intently at Onijuro's profile.
Beside the burned-out post station, soldiers gathered in a small grove. None slept. All felt their wounds ache, despairing at the station's devastation. Circles of people formed around several bonfires.
And Onijuro, too, stared into the flames. The small warmth, yet its crimson hue overlapped with the inferno that had consumed Nofumi Inn. Deep within her nostrils, the stench of Kanbee's death clung stubbornly.

Trying to shake off that residue, Onijuro drew her sword smoothly. The weight of the thick blade tried to restore the exorcist's strength. But the moment she saw his own face reflected in the steel...

(Is my training still insufficient...? That I still cannot control myself alone...?)

Evil surged within her. Sadness and frustration. But this was no time to be overwhelmed by emotion. She must reclaim Chizuru, and quickly.

Still, strength wouldn't return to her limbs. Perhaps it was the exhaustion from crying for the first time in so long. Unable to sort her feelings, Onijuro sheathed her sword.

“Master, what shall we do now?” Matashiro asked, holding a bag of food. The disciple watched his unusually silent master with a concerned gaze. “You won't regain your strength unless you eat something.”

“Nothing I eat seems likely to restore my strength...”

“That doesn't sound like the usual Onijuro-sama. In that case, perhaps I could...”

Snaking his way forward, Jakotsumaru snatched the bag from Matashiro. But Onijuro snapped back to her senses and snatched the emergency rations back from the cursed spirit user.

“This is mine. I'll eat it.”

“But you don't seem hungry...”

“Sometimes I'm not. If you want some, ask first.”

“You're such a cheapskate...”

“You...” She started to say weakly... but the exorcist suddenly realized.

Could it be that Jakotsumaru...

“...are... concerned about me?”

Hearing this, Jakotsumaru instantly shut his mouth. His flustered reaction surprised Matashiro too.

“Is that so? You were...”

“You thought that if you picked a fight with me... arguing back would restore my energy, didn't you?” As Onijuro pressed him, Jakotsumaru scratched his head.

"Well, put so bluntly... yes, I suppose so. I wanted you to feel better... though sometimes it backfires." The cursed spirit user admitted in a low voice.

“The best way to clear the fog in your mind is to let it out. For now, just keep talking. Otherwise, Onijuro-dono, you'll break down, you know?”

(He's right...)

Sighing, Onijuro acknowledged the truth in those words. Holding it in was pointless. And if she didn't eat or speak, her body would, indeed, break down. As Jakotsumaru said, now was the time to recover both mind and body.

“You're like a doctor, aren't you?”

Onijuro absentmindedly brought the food to her mouth. It tasted utterly bland. Still, maybe a little...

(Has my fighting spirit returned...?)

The exorcist continued to devour the source of her vitality.

Matashiro finally began to speak again.

"The enemy... took the princess away. The fact there's no body means they didn't kill her immediately. Instead, they left the rosary behind. They intend to do something to the princess. I don't know what exactly."

“The fact they ambushed us means... they must have established a base somewhere beforehand. We can assume they've returned to that base for now. For a cursed spirit to act freely, it absolutely needs a source of spiritual energy to replenish itself.”

Jakotsumaru knelt closer. "Trying to stop them is futile... but we have no chance of winning. Fighting without cursed spirits..."

The cursed spirit user's gaze met Onijuro's. But he quickly looked away as the exorcist spread a map on the ground.

"It was admirable that you slew that cursed spirit called Muren Douji without a cursed spirit - but he was merely a minion. Who knows how many other cursed spirits of his caliber remain? Only after defeating them all will you finally face Kurotsuru."

“Then I'll slay them all. I won't hesitate.”

“But defeating just Muren Dōji took so much effort and left you wounded. Before you reach Kurotsuru, Onijūrō-dono... will you even last?”

“Do you underestimate me?”

“That's precisely why... I'm worried.”

Onijuro grimaced. She couldn't find the words to reply.

“...So you're saying I should just run away? After the princess was taken, after the samurai of Unshu died needlessly... you want me to give up everything?”

The words sparked a boiling surge of fighting spirit within Onijuro. The question was directed at herself too. Flee? Give up?

(Not yet. I won't run away... I will definitely... take her back...!)

As she told herself this, a choking-level fighting spirit surged up. Onijuro, having confirmed what she must do now... had reclaimed the spirit of an exorcist.

“This is no time to be wilting...” Onijūrō turned back to Jakotsumaru. “I am an exorcist... hired by Princess Chizuru. An exorcist... What I must do is clear. Slay the enemy. Save the princess. That is all.”

Jakotsumaru remained silent. Kind words were no longer needed for the exorcist. A smile that understood this stared intently at Onijuro.

(What a strange girl... She was so irritable before... But not now.)

Jakotsumaru's face, lit by the bonfire, conveyed warmth to Onijuro.

Onijuro, too, returned a smile to Jyakotsumaru. Jakotsumaru smiled back, as if to say that was enough.

Yatsushiro noticed the resilient light burning in both their eyes. Ignoring the two exchanging smiles, the boy leaned closer to the map.

"...Anyway... The problem is where the princess was taken. The longer we wait, the harder it will be to rescue her. Couldn't you use your cursed spirit to find her somehow?"

“Hmm... I wonder... No...” Then, scanning the surrounding darkness, Jakotsumaru suddenly fell silent. After a moment... he murmured slowly. “Wait a moment...”

Then, in the darkness, his handsome face broke into a smile. The cursed spirit user pointed his fingertip into the air.
“That...” Where he pointed...
Light floated. A pale blue phosphorescent glow drifted through the air, approaching unsteadily and uncertainly. It was clearly a wandering spirit, driven by its own will.
“What the hell is that?!”
“A cursed spirit! The enemy's cursed spirit has arrived!”
Voices rose from the samurai who noticed it, and the three slowly rose to their feet. The strange light that appeared descended into the woods, dangling its long tentacles.
“Is this... a cursed spirit?”
“Yes. Hōzōin-sama's search cursed spirit, the Lantern Jellyfish.”
“That nun... she's alive...”
“Well, there was no body, was there?”
“So you weren't worried at all...”
“She's not the type to die easily.” Smiling, Jakotsumaru approached the jellyfish floating in the air. The cursed spirit user himself felt a quiet relief inside. Seeing proof of Hōzōin's safety, his face naturally softened.
“So, what does this cursed spirit do...?”
"It's a lantern, precisely. It should guide us through this night path. To Hōzōin-sama."
“And where is this Hōzōin-sama?” Onijūrō's tone hardened. The cursed spirit user's gaze fixed on Onijūrō's sword. The exorcist, already sheathing his long sword at his waist, roughly swept the shelf aside.
"...to the princess, right?"
“Then let's go.”
"Hōzōin-sama has probably uncovered something..."
Onijūrō spat. Unnoticed, her eyes now glowed with fierce fighting spirit.
“Unless I avenge them all and rescue the princess, my martial reputation will be ruined. We depart immediately!”
“We... we'll accompany you...!” The soldiers boldly volunteered. But the exorcist swept her gaze over the crowd of wounded.
“You lot stay here. Beyond this point lies a death trap where even I have no hope of victory. Even if we don't return, head for the next post station tomorrow morning.”
“But then...!”
But Onijuro had no intention of wasting words further. Her fingers cracked sharply. The demon exorcist turned her gaze back to the two comrades standing behind her.
“You two come. To the very end of hell.”
“Of course, we'll accompany you...” Snaking his voice with the boy's, Jakotsumaru smiled.

“It's my fault, isn't it...”
The thoughts that knew everything continued to sob. Even if her voice were taken from her, anger and sorrow would still spread through the darkness. Chizuru's trembling thoughts reached even the heart of the Presence.

Those thoughts dulled the Presence's resolve. Protecting Chizuru wasn't just the power of the jewel. The years of service, the memories, nearly made the Presence hesitate.

(The blame lies not with the princess at all... but...)

(Without vengeance, our ancestors cannot rest in peace...)

(I beg you, please spare her...)

Yet, the thoughts did not cease. Even as she prepared for everything, Chizuru's feelings cried out fiercely.

“Then from the start... You should have targeted only me! Why did you kill so many! Why did you slay them all! The retainers, Nagamori, even those at the inn with no ties...” Chizuru suppressed violent sobs. Before her eyes, that tragedy revived once more. It was no one's fault. That slaughter was her own doing. Even drawing in Onijuro-sama and Jakotsumaru-sama... I can never make amends to them all...”

The ritual puppets began to stir. Casting aside hesitation, the aura slowly resolved itself to the ritual's intent once more.

“Kill me... quickly, I too...” The thought repeated itself. “Kill me... if you wish to kill... If that is what you desire... then kill me... I, too... have no intention of surviving alone...” And then, the thought confronted the aura. “But to this extent... Did you hate me so much...? Did you look at me with eyes of hatred for over a decade? To this extent... Your heart...”

The aura staring at the thought froze for an instant. The presence had long ago cast aside human feelings. It was here now precisely because it had lost its heart.

(So this... is what it comes to...!)

The presence cursed its own immaturity. Yet its furious fist commanded the puppets. As the demonic ritual began, Chizuru finally shut down her thoughts.

“W-wait, Master...”

“Stop dawdling! I'm leaving you behind!”

“Matashiro-kun has an injured leg!”

“We're all wounded! No pampering allowed!”

“Truly a paper balloon of human sentiment...”

The three climbed endlessly up the dark mountain path. Relying solely on the light of the lantern jellyfish, they pressed on through the thickly grassy slope. Reluctantly, Onijuro stopped and forcibly pulled her disciple's arm upward.

“Seems your training hasn't been sufficient, I'm afraid...”

“I... I'm truly sorry... Haah!”

“Let's rest a bit. It's better this way.” Saying this, Jakotsumaru also called out to the Lantern Jellyfish. “This mountain path is too hard for an injured child. Here, take some wild persimmon seeds!”

Yatsushiro popped the black seed grains he received into his mouth. Their intense bitterness had a pain-relieving effect. For a while, leaning against a large tree, Onijuro also caught her breath. “Where do you plan to take this kid?”

“If we keep going straight, we should reach the ridge of Takashiro Mountain...”

“There's a castle ruin there... I'm sure...” Approaching the Chōchin-Jellyfish, Onijūrō spread out a map. The destination she confirmed with her fingertip was still far off.

“We must hurry after all. Matashiro, let's go!”
“Why can't you wait just a little longer!”
“You! Don't you care about the princess?!”
“Of course I do! But Matashiro-kun and Onijuro-sama worry just as much! Can we win?!” Jakotsumaru raised his voice. Onijuro stared intently at his face, then slowly squeezed out her words.
“I worry about you, you know! We can win. Together.”
“Wh-what?”
“Didn't I say we'd join forces?”
“But... suddenly asking that...” Jakotsumaru’s flustered gaze shifted to Matashiro. But the boy had never seen his master like this before either. Hesitantly, the cursed spirit user repeated his question. “You'll truly join forces with me?”
“An exorcist never goes back on his word.”
“Just so you know, I'm a guy who wears makeup, I'm weak... and on top of that, I adore young girls. Is that still okay with you?”
“It doesn't matter.” She declared it calmly.
Suddenly, Jakotsumaru expressed his joy with his whole body. “You finally like me, don't you?!” He shouted, lunging to embrace her. Then right before his nose...
Onijuro's sword tip was thrust forward. With a swiftness that showed no sign of hesitation, Onijuro continued, his words calm and measured.
“...You and I are complete opposites.”
“.....”
“I am a man. You are...”
“...a woman. And our personalities too...”
“You're frivolous, I'm strict.”
“No, I'm honest. You, Onijuro-dono, are stubborn.” At Jakotsumaru's assertion, Matashiro laughed again.
“Our tastes differ too. I like women, but...”
“I don't care much for men.”
“You don't pay much attention to those around you either...”
“Shut up, you people-pleaser!”
“Always tense, never showing an opening...”
“You're the one who relaxes too much.”
“I couldn't live with that stiff, uptight manner either.”
“I can't live as carefree as you either.”
“Our fighting styles are different too. I rely on cursed spirits...”
“I rely solely on my own skill.”
“But... this time is different, isn't it?” Ah, nodding, the exorcist smiled faintly. “Even if we're complete opposites... we have to make it work...” Sheathing her sword, Onijuro looked up at Jakotsumaru. Jakotsumaru's gaze met hers. Unaware of the smiling Matashiro, the two stared at each other for a moment.
“When you smile, you really do look your age.” For some reason, Jakotsumaru smiled back. “Once we save the princess, perhaps a kimono as a reward...”
“Shut up! Enough of this nonsense...!”

“No, if you put on makeup, surely...”
“As if! You're not the one who'd wear it!”
“Surely you don't think it wouldn't suit you?”
“Of course it wouldn't suit me! Pf-f-t, a woman's kimono!”
“But Onijuro-sama, you are a woman!”
“Shut up! I've forgotten about being a woman!”
“Yet you take such long baths, don't you?” Hearing this... Onijuro froze. The smile vanished from the exorcist's face. Matashiro had already taken refuge in the shade of a large tree. Jakotsumaru slowly backed away from the trembling Onijuro.
“So... so... soooooo what?!”
Jakotsumaru's movement was a split second too slow. Onijuro lunged forward, stomping on the cursed spirit user's foot and clamping both arms around his collar. Baring her fangs, the exorcist closed in on Jakotsumaru's face. “Just... just now... I realized...!”
“Wh-what did you realize?!”
“I've always remarked that you knew my physique rather well...”
“Well, thank you for the compliment...”
“Don't you dare joke around! You peeped at me in the bath at the Takinomiya inn, didn't you?!” All her strength squeezed Jakotsumaru to the point of suffocation. Matashiro rushed over in panic.
“Stop it! Not now!”
“Shut up! Get off me, Matashiro!”
“Guh... choking... s-squeezing meeeee...”
“Speak up! How much did you see? How much of my naked body did you see?!”
“Stop it, Master!”
“Only the back... only the back, truly...”
“Be honest! Lying won't do you any good!” For a moment, Onijuro loosened her grip. She took a deep breath, and Jakotsumaru flushed, smiling sheepishly.
“Ah! Also, the back scrubbing...”
“Cut!”
Jakotsumaru desperately pinned Onijuro's sword down.
“Don't be so dramatic! It's just back scrubbing.....”
“Shut up! I don't need your help anymore! I'll cut you down right here!”
“Master, what's a back rub?”
“Help me, would you?! Cut this guy down!”
“I'm sorry! I'm sorry, please...”
Then, suddenly... “Guh!” “Nuh!” “It hurts!”
A shockwave slammed into the three's skulls. A kongo stuff burst from the bushes, delivering a merciless blow. As the three fell, a purple nun's robe pounced on them. “You lot are far too loud!”
“Ho, Hōzōin-sama! So you're safe...?” Clutching his throbbing skull, Jakotsumaru started to voice his joy at the reunion. But the nun's hand clamped down, silencing him. She nudged the still-groaning exorcist with her foot, her face twisted in displeasure.

“This is enemy territory! Do you intend to reveal our movements?!”
"Guh... You fool, you ruined my bath...”
“That can wait! The princess is more important!”
Shouting softly, Hōzōin retrieved the lantern jellyfish into her crystal. The nun parted the thicket and led the three toward the ridge. Jakotsumaru frowned at his guardian's robust state.
“Still... why was the post station in such a state?”
“You understand, it was an ambush.”
“Was the enemy Kurotsuru?”
“I haven't confirmed that, but...” Hōzōin lowered her voice further. “In any case, the inn was attacked in an instant by a swarm of puppet cursed spirits, and I was thrown into the fray. There was absolutely no time to save the princess...”
“Neither Nagamori-dono nor Kanbee-dono made it.” Recalling this, Jakotsumaru scanned his surroundings. “Then... why are you here, Hozoin-sama?”
“I sensed a powerful... likely around five hundred cursed energy escaping the inn. I sent the Lantern Jellyfish after it first, then pursued myself.”
“Five hundred cursed energy...”
The exorcist locked eyes with the cursed spirit user. No matter how much training one undergoes, the human limit for cursed energy is two hundred. An opponent far surpassing that...
“So Black Crane has come after all, personally to this place...”
“Do you know where he went?”
At Onijuro's question, Hozōin gave a brief nod. Then, abruptly stopping, she pointed toward the ridge's summit. “The ruined castle. Abandoned for over a century... Enormous cursed energy is gathering at those castle ruins.”
Jakotsumaru also concentrated his will. Against the indigo night sky, decaying structures indeed floated along the ridge line. And a swarm of cursed energy, writhing and squirming disgustingly. Jakotsumaru turned to face the Exorcist. Onijūrō, too, was watching the Cursed Spirit User.
“It seems the time has come.”
“Indeed. The time for us opposites to join forces...”
A night wind swept across the ridge. The nun and the boy nodded firmly at their words.

(Is that... certain?)
From the darkness, countless white arms reached out. The bloodless, corpse-colored arms tangled together, rushing toward the presence.
(No mistake!)
(Exorcist! Exorcist!)
(Disgusting smell! Smell! Smell!)
Bright red mouths sprouted from the palms that snapped open. Amid the rapid-fire reports, the presence...
(How did the ritual go?)
(Well, I don't know yet...)

A drawn-out voice answered. A pale, slimy slug drifting in the darkness writhed its massive, ox-like body, constantly secreting mucus.
(It's... it's far away... so...)
(Barakki, stay put...)
A calm thought flew into the void. The presence in the darkness snorted heavily, appearing before the aura.
(Release my subordinate lesser cursed spirits outside the castle. Kill every intruder the moment you find them...)
(Then, is there no role for us?)
A new presence asked. But the colossal spirit sent a warning to its two confidants.
(They are the ones who defeated Moggallana. We must not let our guard down.)
(Still, they are merely humans...)
A shrill, woman's laughter resounded.
(There is no way they could defeat us... Ho ho ho!)
Even so, the aura did not relax its tension. To the gathering swarm of cursed power, the thoughts issued a stern warning.
(Remember, humans are weaker than us. Yet humans sometimes devise schemes beyond our comprehension. They are cunning, clever. That is why, six hundred years ago, our enchanted pearl was stolen by humans...)
In the darkness, the grotesque group gathered complete. The aura once more made the resilient spirit body tremble.
(Exploit their weaknesses... Humans are creatures full of flaws. Then victory will be ours.)
The monstrosities dispersed. And the aura once more sank into the dark silence.

It wasn't what you'd call a castle gate.
The entrance to the castle ruins was just a wooden gate. The abandoned castle of Takashiroyama seemed to have been hastily built as a logistics base during wartime. There were no castle walls; the perimeter was merely covered by a sacred fence.
From beyond the decaying wooden gate... white light streamed forth. Countless streams of it. Like comets, each trailing a tail.
The white light, upon escaping the castle grounds, landed cautiously. Dozens of comets arrived one after another, and then... revealed their true form. Translucent figures emerged from the darkness. Their skin, and even their waist-length hair, shone pure white. Baring their full, rounded breasts and sharply defined waists, the white women spread out around the gate with grace.
They resembled a swarm of fireflies.
Right into their midst...
“Exorcise the evil!” A lightning-like convergence flew. Simultaneously, the women leapt. A battle cry of interception. Onijuro's sword slashed through the first three. Shrill screams. Jet-black feathers scattered through the air. While still aloft, she cut down two more. Breaking through the center of the swarm, the exorcist landed firmly on the ground.

Behind her, blood-soaked monstrous birds swarmed. Black, utterly motionless. The women, too, finally shed their last pretense. Their pure white robes were replaced with blood-soaked ones, only their eyes glowing red. The lower-ranked cursed spirits, feeding on carrion, threatened with the foul cawing of crows.

“I'll pass through this gate!” At the roar, the monstrous birds swarmed. The screech of claws tearing through darkness filled Onijuro's ears, but the exorcist hesitated not. Without retreating, she swung her white blade left and right. Instantly, screams erupted.

Black arms flew off in multiple directions. Beautiful severed heads, trailing long black hair, rolled onto the ground. She sliced through a side, cleaved a face, thrust the tip between breasts. Instantly, a mountain of corpses piled up around Onijuro.

But...

“They're here...”

Onijūrō saw through it. An overwhelming, unnatural power, far beyond that of the demon birds, was slowly approaching.

An ominous, dreadful aura filled the air, spreading a raw, warm stench. An eerie mist, like night fog, clung obscenely to Onijūrō's sword.

Obscenity clung to it.

“Is that meant to intimidate me?” Saying this, the exorcist sharpened her senses. “....If you wish to test my strength, face me yourself. I won't exert my full power against such worthless scum. Don't mock me...”

(Huh.....I see.....Get...down...on...your...knees...)

As if unable to bear it any longer, an irritated growl echoed across the ground. The black-clad women immediately leapt away from the exorcist. Onijuro lowered her sword to her left, shuffling her feet to gauge the aura of cursed energy.

(What the hell? Another one of these guys... The Black Crane faction sure has talent...)

The intensifying curse energy forced Onijuro to grip her sword tighter. Was the pounding in his chest fear? Or anxiety that her spiritual energy was running dry? Still, the exorcist asked in a calm voice. “You're under the Black Crane, aren't you...?”

(Indeed... I am… Ba... Ra... Oni...) The voice that answered made the air itself tremble.

Then... the ground shook violently. The earth split open on either side of Onijuro, hot winds erupting from beneath. The demon birds mocked the exorcist as she desperately tried to steady his footing. But Onijuro paid no heed, her gaze fixed firmly on the approaching cursed energy.

At the end of that gaze...

As if surfacing from water, a colossal form emerged from the earth. Its body, protected by a purple carapace, resembled a wet, gleaming sea squirt. An irregularly spherical body was adorned with six elongated legs densely covered in cilia. Only its head retained a faint semblance of human form. With disheveled white hair, the grotesque old woman's face bared fangs at the exorcist.

(For Lord... Kurotsuru... I... think... I... can... defeat... you...!)

Its massive, tree-like front legs lashed out suddenly. Its spear-like claws smashed through the wooden gate and plunged into the ground. Along with the flying clods of earth, Onijuro's body was sent flying through the air.

But, as if swapping places with the exorcist, the nun's robe leapt before the cursed spirit. A sharp tip protruded from the end of her vajra staff. With that spear, Hozouin deflected the cursed spirit's front leg. Unbowed by the muffled beastly growl, the nun turned to Onijuro. “Go on ahead! I'll handle this!”

The spearhead slammed into the ground at her feet. Spinning the spear like a windmill, Hōzōin leapt back from the blow. “We don't have time to linger here!”

“True... Matashiro!” At that signal, the boy ignited the tail-pull fuse in his bosom. He hurled it from the thicket, aiming for the cursed spirit. Without pause, the homemade flash grenade exploded in the Baraoni's face.

(Oh... no... rr... iii!)

The massive body recoiled violently from the blinding flash. In that instant, Jakotsumaru leapt forward. Still clutching Matashiro under his arm, the cursed spirit user's leap carried him over the Baraoni. Onijuro jumped simultaneously, and all three reached the Baraoni's rear in one swift motion.

“Come forth, Sickle Whirlwind!” The instant he landed, Jakotsumaru released the orb. The unleashed cursed spirit roared, shaking the surrounding trees and enveloping the trio. The black-clad women charged toward the wall of the tornado. But their assault was thwarted.

The swirling whirlwind lashed out with blades of wind, instantly slicing dozens of demon birds in two.

“You fools! Don't hold back!” Onijuro roared from the tornado's center.

“Save your spiritual energy till the end! Your cursed spirits are our trump card!”

Concentrating his cursed energy, Jakotsumaru desperately retorted. “There's no way we can defeat a cursed spirit like this with just a sword! It's reckless!”

Even so, Onijuro shook her head. “Enough... Leave this to me...!”

“Master, fresh attackers!”

“Honestly... They won't let us rest!”

“Onijuro-dono, it's still my...”

“Just put that cursed spirit away!” As the exorcist clicked her tongue, Jakotsumaru recalled the Cursed Spirit Scythe Whirlwind into the orb. The area was densely packed with crow carcasses. From behind came the screams of the Baraoni and the clang of Hōzōin's spear.

As if to drown out that din...

A thunderclap roared. A flash of lightning streaked toward Onijūrō's immediate vicinity. In an instant, a nearby giant tree split apart. Cleaved clean through the trunk, the cedar tree toppled sideways.

“Fly!” The split trunk crashed down dramatically toward the three. But lightning bolts followed, striking the area around the leaping Onijuro. Grass was blown to smithereens, boulders shattered explosively. The master and disciple desperately supported the staggering Jakotsumaru.

“Stand firm! Don't let the enemy see you weak!”

“How can we dodge such fierce cursed spirits one after another?! It's impossible!”

“Jakotsumaru-san, we have to deal with this cursed spirit somehow...!” Matashiro desperately clung to his sleeves.

“Otherwise, we can't move forward!”

“Tell that to your master!” Choking on flying dirt and the acrid smell, Jakotsumaru shed tears. “Right now... I'm just a pawn for Onijuro-dono! Until she tells me to go... Ugh! I'm not trying to step out of line!”

“How carefree you lot are!” Trusting eyes turned toward Onijuro. But the exorcist roared, her anger intensifying. Onijuro gritted his teeth at the enemy's meticulous attack.

“This... is still just play... The real fight begins now...!”

The exorcist, having seen through him, sensed cursed energy deep within the darkness. The thunder god, unleashing lightning bolts, finally began to take a step forward. With each step, tinkle... tinkle...

...a bell's chime echoed from somewhere.

Onijuro raised her blade toward the approaching figure. “How tiresome. You too?”

(Indeed... I am Akirei Shonin) A raspy voice answered. Emerging from the darkness was a wandering monk, a staff in his right hand. The bell hung around his neck. But his face alone...

...was hidden beneath a deeply-brimmed hat, not a single feature visible.

“How rude... If you're going to introduce yourself, at least show your face.”

Regaining her breath, Onijuro furrowed his brow.

“I have no intention of being slain by an unknown foe.”

(I see... That makes sense too) The monk thrust his staff into the ground and lifted his hat. Yuck, Matashiro's throat convulsed. The face revealed had no skin. Raw, crimson flesh was exposed, and the cursed spirit's bulging eyes shifted toward Onijuro.

(Was it you who slew Moren Douji?)

“Yes, that was me.”

(A demon-slayer of the Bokuden school, eh?)

“That is correct.” Suddenly, a swarm of light enveloped the three. Hundreds of fist-sized orbs appeared without warning. As Jakotsumaru braced himself, Akirei Shonin twisted his facial muscles in a mocking sneer.

(Then... I shall put you to death.)

“Gah!” “Ugh!” “Aah!” The three screams overlapped. Lightning burst from the tips of Akirei Shonin's branches. Those bolts, swift as lightning itself, conducted to the surrounding orbs. Immediately, thunderbolts were unleashed from the instantaneously formed lightning net, targeting the three.

At the screams, Hōzōin shifted her gaze. “Jakotsumaru! Onijūrō-dono!”

But before the nun's eyes, Baraoni's heart pressed in. She leapt, striking the nun. Merely pinning its front legs down was all Hōzōin could manage.

“Master! Aaah!” The boy who cried out collapsed face-first onto the ground. Yatsushiro, struck in the knee, writhed in agony. The smell of burning flesh made Onijuro grind her molars.

Onijuro herself stood firmly, her sword raised before her face. Jakotsumaru, too, formed a seal with both hands, standing back-to-back with Onijuro. Lightning strikes relentlessly upon them both, yet neither shows any sign of falling. They were

solely focused on harnessing their cursed energy to resist this attacking cursed spirit.

(To endure within this net... For humans... astonishing cursed energy...)

Onijuro locked eyes with him, and Priest Akirei intensified his will. What could withstand a cursed spirit was a resisting cursed spirit, a strong spirit body, and cursed energy. The cursed energy willed to defeat, and the cursed energy willed not to be defeated, collided head-on.

But the increasingly fierce blows struck both mercilessly. Onijuro's shoulder split open, flesh scattering. The claws flew from Jakotsumaru's fingertips too, fresh blood splattering the ground. Both were aiming for the decisive counterattack.

(This can't go on forever...)

(Such a powerful cursed spirit can't be sustained...)

Onijuro's thoughts mirrored Jakotsumaru's.

(Its spiritual energy must run out, its cursed energy can't last...)

(Then... we can strike...)

A look of anguish began to appear on Akirei Shonin's face.

(This is no ordinary foe... My cursed spirit, which slays humans with a single strike... is failing...) The sphere of light began to waver. Even the lower-ranked cursed spirits forming the encirclement sensed Akirei Shonin 's weakening. But he expelled all the spiritual energy within his body at once, forcibly summoning a fierce bolt of lightning from the cursed spirits.

(You pests deserve to die! Die! Die! Die!)

Onijūrō felt her skin tearing across her entire body. Her arms, her torso, her neck— unable to withstand the spirit's pressure, they shattered and flew apart. Even so, the exorcist grasped the cursed spirit's impatience.

“Where is the princess...!”

(What good would knowing do! You can't move an inch!)

“Hmm... its cursed power is weakening...”

“Onijuro-samaaa!” The cursed spirit user screamed behind her, his fingers forming seals were already stained crimson. If he stopped now, the immense power of the cursed spirit would shatter Jakotsumaru. Onijuro let out a roar of fury.

(Hehehe... Just one more step!)

“Hold on, you coward!”

“I'm the trump card! Protect me!”

Akirei Shonin's will intensified the pressure. The cursed spirits' lightning, shaking the surroundings, accelerated the impact force with sheer power.

“Oni… Onijūrō-dono, it's no good!”

(Payback! Punishment! Atone for deceiving us!)

Jakotsumaru's consciousness began to shatter white. Lightning streaked diagonally across Onijuro's shoulder to her chest. Dark, viscous blood stained the exorcist's vision.

At that instant...

(Dammit!)

Jakotsumaru collapsed to the ground with a thud. Yet, Akirei Shonin 's encircling attack halted without delivering the final blow. The panicked monk tried to retreat backward. But before the cursed spirit stood...

Onijuro closing in. The girl, her flesh torn, skin scorched, drenched in her own blood, had been waiting. Holding the blade level, she reached Akirei Shonin's chest in a single breath. There was no spirit energy to resist. The grotesque face twisted hideously in terror at the final moment.

“I stake my life on this single stroke...!” The blade's tip pierced the cursed spirit's throat.

“If only I could wait for that fatal strike, victory would be mine! This is the teaching of the Bokuden-ryu Demon-Exorcism Secret Technique...!”

(Foolish... To think you could sever my spirit form with mere cursed power alone...)

Shonin clawed at his throat. But the strike that pierced through to the nape had already severed his life force. Quietly, Onijuro drew her sword. With her spirit body shattered, Priest Akirei began to ooze away from the crown of his head. Leaving only his monk's hat behind, the cursed spirit became a stain upon the earth.

“Matashiro, are you alright?!”

“Oh, Master... Ugh!” Trying to grasp the boy's hand, Onijuro stifled a cry. Her palm was slick with blood. Looking down at her own injuries for the first time, the exorcist let out an exasperated, bitter groan. “I've taken... quite a beating... Tsk!”

“Don't worry about me! Go ahead with Jakotsumaru-san!”

“...You plan to fight that Baraoni here?”

“The firecrackers are still with me... I can manage somehow...”

“Right. Your sword is useless anyway...” The exorcist glanced back. Jakotsumaru didn't move. Further behind him, the nun was struggling with the Baraoni. Nodding to her, Onijuro forced a brave smile. “Don't push yourself. I'll definitely come back...!”

“Master too!”

Responding, Matashiro crawled toward the Baraoni's rear. The exorcist exhaled heavily through her shoulders. Fighting spirit surged through the girl's body. Onijuro, using her sword as a staff, rushed toward the fallen cursed spirit user. “Get up, trump card! No time to sleep!”

“I'm expendable. Leave me behind...”

“You're the one with shallow wounds! Stop whining!” Kicked hard in the back, Jakotsumaru's eyes snapped open in pain. Before him stood a blood-soaked, demonic visage. Hair disheveled, blood streaming from every pore, she resembled an executed samurai.

Yet, her gaze alone shone with clarity. Her face, flushed with vitality, wiped sweat from her damp cheeks with her sleeve. Then, slowly, she exhaled a deep, long breath. The scent reached Jakotsumaru. The cursed spirit user shuddered at Onijuro's spirit and beauty.

“But you’re in no state...”

“I’m here to protect you! Only by preserving you do we stand a chance of victory... Guh...!”

“Shouldn't we tend to your wounds first...”

“Is there time for that?! I'll be your shield! If I die, there'll be no need for treatment! Let's go!”

Only now did Jakotsumaru feel terror. Onijuro's cursed power far surpassed that of a mere human. An unfathomable fighting spirit and utter self-sacrifice. She truly was an unparalleled exorcist...

(Master Akirei has fallen...)

An aura echoed frustration within the darkness.

(That exorcist will reach here soon. Can you hold him off, Nun with the Umbrella...?)

(Needless to say...)

A confident, booming laugh echoed, accompanied by an exaggerated nod.

(It won't take long. Leave everything to me.)

The presence sank back into the darkness. The source of the laughter released a vicious spiritual energy, weaving a web of cursed spirit traps in all directions.

“This place is...!” Kicking down the doorway, Jakotsumaru and Onijuro shouted in unison. Suddenly, blinding flashes filled their vision. Overwhelmed by the dazzling light, they tried to scramble back. But it was too late. Both had already stepped into another world.

The garrison should have been at the heart of the ruined castle. The only remaining structure, decaying yet standing, was the former castle's core. What the two who had plunged in should have seen was likely just a pile of debris. Yet...”

“They're coming out from over there...”

“They're completely underestimating us...”

"No... They're lying low in large numbers. Don't let your guard down."

It was a vast, barren wasteland.

The sky was covered in crimson-black clouds, and an ominous gale raged across the earth. The ground, devoid of even a single weed, was parched and cracked hard. Inside the garrison, a demonic realm awaited the two.

On the distant horizon, pointing to the edge of that demonic realm...

“Onijuro-sama... that thing over there...”

Trembling fingers pointed toward the distance. Jakotsumaru had spotted the lone great tree standing tall amidst the barren wasteland. Its withered branches stretched out like the arms of corpses, and the trunk, standing rigidly as if in agony, resembled a tombstone. But the Cursed Spirit User had also noticed the delicate maiden bound to that trunk.

“Lady Chizuru...”

“How amusing... So you think you can take it if you can get it? That's exactly what I want...!” Onijūrō popped a persimmon seed into her mouth, grimacing at its bitterness. But using that bitter juice to suppress her pain, she gripped swords in both hands. A tachi in her right hand, a wakizashi held in reverse grip in her left, the exorcist stepped away from Jakotsumaru's shoulder.

“Are you really... all right?”

"Enough already... There's no one else but us. We have to do this...!"

“Of course, I'll accompany you...!”
Nodding, the exorcist stepped in front of Jakotsumaru.
“I'll cut them down. You head to the princess.....”
“Please, take care of yourself.....”
“They won't let me, you see...” Simultaneously with the words, Onijuro leapt. The Cursed Spirit User slashed his tonbo behind him. A split second later, multiple attacks struck the pair. Explosions, pillars of fire, corrosive acid, and foul odors erupted all at once, making Jakotsumaru scream.
“Onijuro-dono!” But the exorcist gave no reply. Onijuro, airborne, spun her body at divine speed. Flashes of blades crisscrossed left and right as the girl landed on the barren ground. Unidentifiable debris rained down around them. The exorcist turned her sharp gaze to survey the surroundings.
Clouds and wilderness were swarming with monstrous hordes.
They were monstrous creatures, stitched together from the grotesque parts of familiar beings: humans, beasts, birds, fish, insects. Maggots with bat wings. Naked women whose lower halves had been transformed into slugs. The half-rotted head of a giant cat. A swarm of infants shaking frog heads.
Roughly two hundred. At a glance, it was clear they were all cursed spirits, created solely for battle.
Jakotsumaru rushed to the exorcist's back. “What... are our chances, Onijuro-sama?”
“There are far too many. Can we subdue them?”
“You must be joking! They're nothing but bundles of fighting instinct! Utterly devoid of any charm whatsoever!”
“Then... wait a moment...” Onijuro dug her toes deep into the ground.
“Now... I'll cut through them!”
A roar of battle erupted.
The demon exorcist charged into the heart of the frenzy. Her first strike severed the one-eyed wolf's head. Her tachi followed, cleaving the black tengu's face. She delivered a roundhouse kick to the two-headed serpent circling behind her, then leapt over the back of the human-faced fox. She charged headlong at the white-haired mass, knocking it aside with a body slam before cleaving it in two with her sword. Shrill screams echoed one after another across the wilderness.
“That should clear out the cursed spirits!” With a satisfied smile, Jakotsumaru grasped the crystal ball. With a single thought, the Summoned Cursed Spirit was unleashed.
“I’m counting on you, Kinrei!” The Cursed Spirit user leapt onto the giant coin with a surge of courage. The enemy horde was distracted by Onijuro. Jakotsumaru charged straight through the gale, aiming to close in on Chizuru in one swift move.
“Jakotsumaru, don't rush!” Slashing through the poisonous spider's torso, the exorcist roared. “There are still many enemies! Don't push yourself!”
“This is the moment of truth, Onijuro-sama!” Responding from the sky, Jakotsumaru fixed his gaze on the swarm of cursed spirits ahead. His cursed energy was already fully concentrated. “No more holding back!” Calling the name of Enra Enra, the

Cursed Spirit User hurled a crystal orb into the air - at the heart of the enemy's counterattack, the summoned cursed spirits materialize swiftly.

A colossal fireball is born. The cursed spirits dancing through the sky have no room to evade. Over twenty cursed spirits were instantly engulfed by the flames.

“Not bad, you third-rate onnagata!”

Onijuro smirked at Jakotsumaru breaking through the enemy lines. The clamoring cursed spirits tried to pursue the Kinrei behind them, but Onijuro's twin blades struck their backs. Not even a single exorcist allowed these monsters to retreat.

“Princess Chizuru! Your Highness!” Shouting, Jakotsumaru dashed toward the great tree. He leapt down from Kinrei in haste, retrieving the summoned cursed spirits. The market woman's hat from their first meeting hung limply, bound to the trunk. Seeing the rough rope digging into her soft skin, the cursed spirit user cried out involuntarily.

“Are you unharmed, Princess Chizuru?”

“That voice...?”

“It is yours truly, Jakotsumaru! Along with Onijuro-dono, we have come to rescue the Princess!” The cursed spirit user began loosening the ropes while keeping a watchful eye on the enemy's movements. Chizuru's voice was weak and faint. As soon as the bonds loosened, she collapsed, kneeling heavily on the barren ground.

“Are you hurt anywhere, Lady Chizuru!”

“I am not... but my legs tremble...” Her voice, too, was undeniably trembling.

Jakotsumaru took her slender fingers in his own, cradling Chizuru's delicate shoulders.

(At any rate... you're safe, and that's what matters most...)

He breathed a sigh of relief, then shielded the girl behind his back. Alongside Onijuro, the swarm of cursed spirits gradually closed in on the great tree. As the enemy forces approached, screaming, Jakotsumaru concentrated his will.

“What are you doing, Jakotsumaru-dono?!”

“Leave it to me! I'll blow them all away!”

“You still have that much spiritual energy left?!”

“Of course! This is my trump card!” Smiling brightly, the Cursed Spirit User turned to the princess. “I'll use the Cursed Spirit I've been saving until the very end!”

(That... is troublesome.)

Suddenly, that voice sounded.

Jakotsumaru's spine froze. The owner of that lamenting female voice was none other than... From beneath the Chizuru, a low, intent-filled roar echoed. But by the time he realized it, the cursed spirit user's body had been violently flung back by the impact.

“Jakotsumaru, that's...!” Onijuro's gaze, amidst the chaos, locked onto the true identity beneath the market woman's hat. Flung back, the hat revealed a shaven-headed woman's face. But her eyes—two wide, yellow orbs—had no eyelids. Her pupils were long and slanted. The snake-eyed nun raised her arms toward the summoned cursed spirits.

(You lot, attack! Slay that exorcist!)

“You're a cursed spirit too?!” The exorcist slashed away the cursed spirits flanking him, trying to reach the fallen Jakotsumaru. But the laughing snake monk kicked the groaning Jakotsumaru.

(That momentary relief was fatal, heh heh...)

“Th-the real...” Jakotsumaru gasped, unable to finish. His back, split vertically and drenched in blood, was trampled under a woman's foot. The snake eyes turned toward Onijuro.

(If it were the real Chizuru, she'd be in the middle of the ritual to extract the jewel. Well done, falling right into this here Umbrella Nun's trap...)

But Onijuro was still in the thick of the sword fight. She slashed through the swarming cursed spirits one by one, desperately trying to close in on the Umbrella Nun.

Instead, Jakotsumaru's groan asked the question.

“Ritual... What do you mean by ritual...?”

(Of course, the ritual to retrieve the charm...)

“This is the charm... This must be the charm...” The cursed spirit user pulled a rosary from his robe. The treasure he had salvaged from the flames glowed dully. But the Umbrella Nun let out a loud, mocking laugh.

(Ho ho ho! So that's the fake charm bead! I see—a fine toy for deceiving human eyes!)

“That rosary is fake? What do you mean?!” Onijuro struck down the pursuing enemy and closed in before the Umbrella Nun. But above her head...

(What good does knowing that do...)

At the voice, Onijuro raised his face. And then... she looked down at her own arms. A tremor ran from her fingertips. Before she knew it, goosebumps covered her skin all the way up to his shoulders. She swallowed repeatedly. Her back teeth were chattering.

(Calm down... Calm down...!)

The voice spoke but a single word. Yet that single word plunged the continent's foremost exorcist into terror. Her grip on the sword went limp. Still, Onijuro clenched her jaw and sent her fighting spirit into her arms. The exorcist once more turned her gaze toward the poisonous, malevolent sky above.

Crimson-black clouds drifted leisurely by. The grim sea of clouds eventually parted, and then...

The sun appeared.

Pale blue bands of light pierced the clouds, descending in multiple streams toward the demon realm. The heated air expanded, and Onijuro lowered his eyes. The heat felt like it was burning his skin.

(Oh... Lord Kurotsuru...)

Gazing up at the sky, the nun with the umbrella uttered a cry of awe.

(The guardian deity of Kizutani, created by the Southern Mountain God, protector of the waterfall, the spring, and the forest, bringer of peace!!!... Please, I beg you, punish these ones... these sinful humans who slew Mokuren-douji and Gyokurai Shoujin... strike them with the arrows of your wrath...)

“Is it coming...!” Onijūrō braced for the strike. But Jakotsumaru's senses detected the emergence of an immense, unforeseen magical power. A trembling voice issued a warning.

“No, Onijuro-sama!” The words were barely out when lightning bolts erupted from the sky. Multiple streaks of lightning fell into Onijuro's field of vision. The exorcist gasped. There was no time to dodge. A swarm of powerful cursed spirits, unlike anything Onijuro herself had ever experienced, were closing in on the exorcist.

(Dammit!)

The instant she cursed her fate, his consciousness flashed white. The power of the cursed spirits slammed into each of her limbs. Struck directly by the lightning, the exorcist

couldn't even scream. With a thunderous roar, Onijuro was slammed into the barren earth. And with that... it was all over.

“Oni...!” Jakotsumaru swallowed his own scream. Amidst the swarm of summoned cursed spirits, the exorcist lay motionless. It had been a single instant, a single blow.

“...Get up...” Jakotsumaru whispered to the motionless Onijuro.

“...Get up, Onijuro-dono... Wake up, move...”

(How foolish... To defy Kurotsuru-sama's cursed spirits with mere cursed energy... What a foolish exorcist...)

The Umbrella Nun continued to trample Jakotsumaru.

(Even if she is the continent's greatest exorcist... she is still but a human. She could never defeat Lord Kurotsuru, who commands the cursed gods of Kizutani...)

“Fight, Onijuro-dono! Stand and fight... The enemy is coming... Kurotsuru is coming...”

(You too cling to your regrets forever...)

“Onijuro-dono! Can't you hear me! Onijuro-dono!!!”

Soon... the forms of the summoned cursed gods vanished one after another. On the vast, open plain, only the exorcist remained, utterly alone.

Beside her, a holy light descended.

Within the swirling bands of light, an even more dazzling flash began to shine. The light raged, roaring and howling. But Jakotsumaru did not flinch from the white-hot storm, his gaze unwavering. Then, as the blinding light began to subside, it finally started to transform into a human form.

Amid the swirling bands of light, an even more dazzling flash erupted. The light raged, roaring with a growl. But undeterred by the blazing storm, Jakotsumaru did not avert his gaze. Then, as the blinding light began to subside, it finally started to transform into a human form.

(What... kind of cursed energy...) Jakotsumaru watched the transformation in stunned silence. An enemy of staggering power, possessing an extraordinary amount of spiritual energy, was now revealing itself. This wasn't even a contest. The difference in strength was so overwhelming it instantly crushed his will to fight.

As if uttering a delirious mutter, Jakotsumaru's mouth twitched.

“Y-You're Kizu's...”

(Indeed... Kurotsuru) Nodding magnanimously, the opponent's gaze fixed squarely on Jakotsumaru. Overwhelmed by the oppressive atmosphere, Jakotsumaru went limp.

(There's no way I can win... This guy isn't just a cursed spirit... He's... a god... The guardian deity of Kizutani...)

But crawling on blood-soaked hands, the Cursed Spirit User raised his upper body.

“Tell me everything... What is your goal... Why did you plot this conspiracy...”

(All the sin lies with the Sakakibara family... ....)

The figure spoke, then quietly closed its eyes. At that moment, the prayer beads in Jakotsumaru's palm shattered into dust. Kurotsuru slowly approached Jakotsumaru.

(So you demand we expose those sins.....?)

A black standing cap, black hakama. Swirling a white suikan, he drew nearer.

Jakotsumaru lost his voice at the sight of that slender youth. Beneath a small, pointed chin lay coolly beautiful eyes and crimson lips. His porcelain skin seemed translucent, and each slender fingertip radiated a polished, sculpted beauty. It was a beauty that sent shivers down the spine.

(The matter traces back six hundred years...)

Kizu's Black Crane let out a voice like the ringing of bells.

(The tale circulating among humans... originates from a fairy tale storybook....)

“Ah, so all of that... was a lie...?”

(Not all of it.) Black Crane knelt beside Jakotsumaru. (It is true I intended to send the Mirror Stone to Meiju. It is true I was moved by his sincere devotion.)

The Umbrella Nun continued. (However, the stone within those prayer beads was not the Sister Pearl. It was merely a stone block, a fake crafted by the Prince. The Sister Pearl is something we can never relinquish.)

“Then what is the Sister Pearl...?”

(A mass of spiritual energy that resided within my body.) Kurotsuru declared this as if admonishing. (The one and only thing that existed within my body from birth. It emits an absolute cursed spirit that captivates others... For me, it is indispensable...)

(You humans stole it! The governors deceived Lord Kurotsuru and took it away!)

“H-how...?” All he could do was keep asking. Stunned, Jakotsumaru was mesmerized by Kurotsuru's gaze. The cursed spirit continued to answer gently.

(I told Meiju to come to Nishina Falls. I intended to give him the Mirror Stone there. But Meiju, out of excessive reverence for me, informed the governor of this matter. To Sakakibara Tadamasa, the Governor of Unshu at that time...)

(He could see Lord Kurotsuru's noble countenance. He thought, “If only the Governor could come and witness this sight...”)

(But... that was the root of the mistake. Tadamasa was driven by greed. He sought to obtain my Hanzu, as rumored, to bind his vassals and subjects. And to seize the Mijū, he laid a trap. Thirty exorcists created a barrier, and twenty puppeteers attacked me. Those bastards... captured me and Meiju...)

Jakotsumaru turned his gaze to the motionless Onijuro. Black smoke rose from the exorcist's body. But undeterred, the cursed god continued speaking dispassionately.

(Tadamasa ripped open my belly. He stole the Mijū and discarded my body. He also cut down Meiju when she resisted. Since then, the Mijū has been in the Sakakibara household...)

“Inside Lady Chizuru's body...?”

(Indeed! Tadamasa swallowed the Mijū himself! Then, fabricating a false tale, he gained the Mijū's power and solidified his rule over Unshū!)

“Then why is the Mijū inside the princess?!”

The Cursed Spirit User looked up at the Umbrella Nun.

“Why didn't you retrieve it until now?! Why now, at this very wedding procession?! Why...” Jakotsumaru turned his gaze back to Kurotsuru. “Why... why did Lady Chizuru have to suffer this...!”

Kurotsuru rose calmly. The Lord of Kizutani exhaled and spoke.

(Tadamasa died, and the Bead was lost. But the Bead is reborn. Within the body of his descendants, the Bead gradually begins to sprout, eventually becoming a magnificent mass of spiritual energy... After countless generations...)

“That completed Bijū resides within... Lady Chizuru...”

The nun opened her split mouth, letting out a shrill cry. (Well, we waited! We waited! For six hundred years! When that princess, bearing the Bijū within her, was born, how overjoyed we were!)

(We waited... endlessly... for one born with the completed charm. But that very princess declared she would leave our ancestral land, Unshu.)

(We could not allow it! Departing Unshu's spiritual source, even we would be powerless... Thus we plotted to seize the charm... to seize Chizuru!)

Jakotsumaru stared at the broken bead of the rosary. "Even after losing the Mijū, the Sakakibara clan crafted this to feign its power still intact...

(Exactly! They forged a fake Mijū, touted it as miraculous, and subjugated their subjects! Tadamasa alone wielded the true power of the Mijū, but his descendants possess only counterfeit power! This secret was known only to the governors through the generations—neither the retainers, nor even Chizuru, knew the truth! They all revered a lie!)

(But that princess is different...) Kurotsuru locked eyes with Jakotsumaru. (That princess possesses the true charm stone, the first since Sakakibara Tadamasa. Therefore, I too shall slit her belly and extract the charm stone. No one shall interfere.)

With that, the youth shed his water-resistant outer robe. Then, slowly, he yanked open the inner sleeve at his chest. Jabukotsumaru gasped involuntarily. On Kurotsuru's pale, flat chest was etched a long, straight scar running vertically.

(This wound... has not yet healed...) Kurotsuru's voice held quiet anger. (After losing the charm bead, my cursed spirits dwindled, and my own cursed power weakened. But if I wait for it to heal, the charm bead will leave Unshu...!)

Jakotsumaru lay down, powerless. Back then, when he saw Chizuru up close, whatever captured Jakotsumaru was indeed the power of the Mijū. Not the power emitted by the rosary, but the power Chizuru herself possessed. An innate, absolute cursed spirit...

“I see... I understand your feelings. But... how could you do such a terrible thing?” The cursed spirit user staggered to his feet once more. “No matter how powerful a cursed spirit, harming a princess possessing the charm of the Mijū is an impossible feat. I doubt her cursed energy, capable of resisting the bead, has recovered.”

Jakotsumaru wiped the blood from the corner of his mouth. “Who on earth... could possibly slit the princess's belly...?”

(Even if I knew, it would be too late now.) Kurotsuru conjured a long sword from the void. (I cannot let the one who slew Mōren and Kyōrai live... Or should I die after witnessing Chizuru's end, as punishment for killing my own?)

“If possible... I wish to see your end first...”

(Bullshit!) The Umbrella Nun's strike once more sent Jakotsumaru flying. Her scaly arms struck the cursed spirit user, and his staggering body sank into the wilderness. Kurotsuru's blade swiftly closed in on his fallen throat.

(One who wields cursed spirits must side with cursed spirits...)
“I choose my own allies...”
(Even if it's an evil lineage! Even if it's deception and lies! Even if it's a sinner!) For the first time, Kurotsuru raised his voice. But Jakotsumaru spoke his conviction with confidence.
"The Chizuru-sama I know... has no sin. She is the one who believed in me... Even if that charm was the power of the Mijū, I will respond to Chizuru-sama's feelings... "
(So you'll even ally with exorcists for that!)
“Yes... Of course.”
(Aren't they enemies of you cursed spirit users?!)
“Yes.... indeed.” As he answered, Jakotsumaru couldn't help but let a smile slip. “But I'm on the side of the beautiful...”
(Don't spout nonsense...)
“Indeed, we are polar opposites... But I made a promise. To fight together. To join forces and protect the Princess...”
(Are you saying you'd die for that promise...)
“If that is the only path.....” Resigned, Jakotsumaru closed his eyes. The Umbrella Nun grinned. Kurotsuru raised his blade expressionlessly.
(A noble resolve...)
“I'm not so sure about that...”
Suddenly, a laughing voice rang out. Kurotsuru spun around at the mockery. The Umbrella Nun bared her fangs in rage.
But...
Before the two cursed gods, the mocking laughter echoed once more. Met by stunned gazes, the voice's owner exhaled deeply and long.
“A stinking charade. Don't be fooled... His true nature is... nothing but a fool...”
“Onijuro-dono...”

“Oni... Onijuro-dono...” Jakotsumaru called out to the intruder in a trembling voice.
“Fine lines, Jakotsumaru... A stinking third-rate play, enough to make even Kurotsuru weep...” She finally managed a smile. But blood clogging her throat cut off her words. Even so, Onijuro swallowed her own blood without even a whisper.
(Impossible, she was still alive...!) The screaming Umbrella Nun strained her eyes at the figure rising. Yet after half a day of fierce battle, the exorcist was hacked to pieces. Supporting a single sword with both hands, she looked like nothing more than a human wreck.
(No... she's barely clinging to life...)
Jakotsumaru agreed with the Umbrella Nun's words. She could barely stand. She was truly covered in wounds. “This is reckless, Onijuro-dono!” Gritting his own pain, Jakotsumaru shouted. “With those wounds, against Kurotsuru...”
“Are you admitting defeat, you fool...?” Onijuro cut him off, a smile spreading across her face. "Even if it is the famed Cursed God... it is still but a bird... no match for human ingenuity." The exorcist's face was blackened with congealed blood. Sharp eyes gleamed from that face as the girl raised her sword. “And... have you

forgotten...? Our trump card is your cursed spirit. As long as you exist, we have a chance. Defeating Kurotsuru... is your job...”

Onijuro stared straight into the cursed spirit user's eyes. Her gaze held fighting spirit. They were the eyes of an exorcist who never gave up on victory.

(There's a chance to win...! Onijuro-dono has noticed Kurotsuru's weakness But what if she hadn't noticed...?)

But before Jakotsumaru's eyes appeared the figure of the Umbrella Nun, her fury laid bare.

(How insolent...!) Stepping forward before the silent Kurotsuru, the Umbrella Nun raised both arms. Her ten fingers sharpened like sickles as the cursed spirit shifted into combat stance. (Do you truly believe you can defeat Lord Kurotsuru?! First, cut down this Umbrella Nun before you spout such nonsense!)

“I see... Then, come at me...” Maintaining her smile, Onijuro readied her blade. “I won't let Jakotsumaru face you... Cutting you down is my job...!”

(Diiiiiieeeee!) A scream echoed across the wasteland.

The Umbrella Nun leapt, soaring above Onijuro's head. But the exorcist didn't move. She lowered her hips, holding her sword horizontally at her side. The Umbrella Nun closed in on Onijuro in one swift motion.

“Onijuro-dono!” As Jakotsumaru's voice rang out, the Umbrella Nun collided with the exorcist. But she drove straight into Onijuro's shoulders. The girl's body staggered momentarily in the spray of rising blood.

Yet, Onijuro's sword swung back instantly. The blade, striking from the side, pierced the Umbrella Nun's left side. The sword's path continued, tearing through to her right side. Her severed upper body scattered spirit particles as it fell to the ground. The cursed spirit vanished instantly, revealing its true form in the wasteland. Stepping over the torn snake-eye umbrella, the exorcist swung her blade toward Kurotsuru.

(Nice work...) Before Kurotsuru, who held his long sword ready, Onijuro shrugged her shoulders. How much longer could she fight? Her wounds ran too deep to know, her thoughts dulled. Yet, as if following her lead, Jakotsumaru rose too.

“This is my job, isn't it? ...Onijuro-dono...” Behind Kurotsuru, the cursed spirit user gripped his crystal ball once more. Jakotsumaru, bearing the weight of the uprising, locked eyes with Onijuro.

“It seems our trump card is finally needed...”

“Not exactly a trump card I'm thrilled about...”

“Ugh... You rely on me, yet...” Their blood-stained faces met in a shared smile. With Kurotsuru between them, the two took a breath, waiting for the chance to strike.

(This is hopeless. Are you still coming...?)

“I was hired to make it work...” Onijuro inched closer.

“...You won't be able to show your true power either.”

(What does that mean?)

“Your former strength hasn't healed, has it?” The exorcist eyed Kurotsuru appraisingly.

“You were said to master five elements and command thirty cursed spirits. If you'd truly wanted to... you could have succeeded. Yet you mobilized so many summoned cursed spirits...”

“Was the wound from six hundred years ago that deep...?” Naturally, Jakotsumaru noticed too. Kurotsuru had been ripped open and discarded. Only because he was a cursed spirit did he survive, but his recovery required an unfathomably long time. Longer than the time it took for Bijū to regenerate.

Kurotsuru lightly stroked his scar. (Do you think I'm that weak...?)

Onijūrō and Jakotsumaru simultaneously concentrated their will. Against enemies before and behind, the cursed spirit unleashed a torrent of spiritual energy.

(Then test me yourself!) Thoughts fired the torrent of spiritual energy. Kurotsuru's attacking cursed spirits instantly flooded in all directions. There was no time to resist. In an instant, Jakotsumaru was screaming.

“Onijuro...!” But the exorcist had no time to respond. Swept away by the Black Crane's cursed spirits, Onijuro's form vanished too.

First came the tsunami. A towering wave of cursed spirits, born from nothingness, sent them hurtling into the wasteland. Swallowed by the wave, the two were soon submerged beneath the water.

But it wasn't over. As their bodies struggled for air, pillars of flame closed in. A fiery dragon, roaring as it cleaved the waves. Its savage jaws clamped onto Jakotsumaru's torso, flinging Onijuro into the waves. Bubbles gurgled from Jakotsumaru's mouth. Scorching heat enveloped his entire body.

(I can't win! This cursed power is on another level! How could this...) His thoughts were drowned in agony. But just as his despairing mind was about to cease resistance...

(Now you understand, don't you...) Suddenly, Jakotsumaru regained his breath. Abruptly, cold, hard earth. Spotting Onijuro collapsed beside him, the cursed spirit user realized the shift in their surroundings. Both the tsunami and the flames had vanished.

(Even if my wounds aren't fully healed... This cursed power is more than enough to finish you two off...) Completely composed, Kurotsuru advanced. His footsteps drew slowly closer to Onijuro. Seizing the groaning man by the collar, the cursed spirit forcibly dragged the exorcist along.

(...And you still insist on continuing?)

“Where... is Chizuru-sama...?” At last, Onijuro squeezed out the words. Soaked through, charred and covered in blood. The scene was utterly horrific. Not only Jakotsumaru, but even Kurotsuru doubted his own eyes.

(Do you still have any will left, you...?)

“Don't... speak... it's... better... Onijuro...”

“You... shut... up...” Exchanging gasps, the exorcist fixed her gaze on Kurotsuru. “Tell me... the princess... where is she...”

(Cut me down and you'll find her immediately. But...) Kurotsuru mercilessly shook Onijuro's remains. With a voice devoid of pity, he spat at the exorcist.

(What can your body do? You are nothing but a corpse now)

“Did you… forget... you... that I... wouldn’t... slay... you...” With a vacant gaze, Onijuro pointed firmly at Jakotsumaru. “That one... He... He will... Slay you... He knows... Your weakness...”

(My weakness? How laughable...!) Kurotsuru's handsome face twisted in disgust.

(He should know my cursed energy and spiritual power are on a completely different level... Where could he possibly find an opening?)

“That is... your weakness...” Onijuro smiled weakly, yet distinctly. “Everyone has weaknesses... And in trying to hide them, they grow stronger... But the weakness... hasn't vanished from within them... They've merely forgotten it...” She smiled again, this time at Jakotsumaru. “You are strong... but you've forgotten... the weakness that was always within you... the weakness that should still be in your heart... That is our opening...”

Jakotsumaru, too, saw a definite smile on Onijuro's blood-stained face. And in the exorcist's hand, the tachi was still firmly grasped.

(She hasn't given up...!) The Cursed Spirit User understood Onijuro's true intent. All this time, the exorcist had fought relentlessly. And she had done so while protecting her trump card, Jakotsumaru. As long as Jakotsumaru survived, as long as the power of the cursed spirits remained intact, victory was possible in the end. That was Onijuro's conviction.

(That conviction still lives within me. I cannot refuse.) Jakotsumaru desperately rallied his tattered, rag-like body.

"Well then... I suppose I have no choice. Shall we... end the game here?"

(Still at it... What a stubborn bastard.)

"...It's only just beginning. My... once-in-a-lifetime grand stage..."

(What astonishing cursed power... a shame to waste on a human)

Even the Cursed God gazed at Jakotsumaru's resolve with astonishment.

(You certainly got the guts to challenge me to such a reckless battle...)

“I'm flattered... truly honored...”

(I don't know how much the governor paid you...) Kurotsuru sighed, comparing the two. (Do you want to save that princess that badly?)

“Yes... Of course...” Saying this, Jakotsumaru staggered to his feet. His entire body felt heavy as lead, every wound burning hot. Still, the Cursed Spirit User, crystal orb in hand, forced himself to rise before Kurotsuru.

“And... you wounded Onijuro-dono so badly...”

(What are you getting at...?)

"She is beautiful... person... I know... She's a girl so beautiful you could lose yourself staring... To hurt someone like that... I cannot forgive it..."

Even at a time like this...

Jakotsumaru recalled Onijuro's naked form. The real Onijuro, Onijuro as she truly was.

Though lacking the strength of the Constant, she was beautiful and delicate. And she also possessed the weakness to expose his passion at the death of a friend.

(That's right, everyone is weak deep down... Onijuro-dono too... and this Kurotsuru as well... It's only natural to have weak, fragile parts... That's right, everyone is...)

As these thoughts ran through his mind... Jakotsumaru looked at Onijuro once more. Onijuro was looking at Jakotsumaru too. And their wills overlapped, perfectly aligned.

Slowly, Jakotsumaru opened his mouth. “I pity you, but this scheme cannot be forgiven. I will not let you win...”

(How? This exorcist can't use cursed spirits, and you yourself... don't exactly radiate spiritual energy either....) Kurotsuru flashed a pitying smile. (No matter what... there's no way to win.)

“But... what if we used our trump card, the Summoning Cursed Spirit...?”

Jakotsumaru thrust the crystal ball before Kurotsuru.

"It's our trump card... With this one strike...”

(Foolish!) Kurotsuru retorted immediately. (There's no such thing as a cursed spirit that can defeat me!)

“But you, too... are not invincible...” The cursed spirit user closed the distance as he spoke. “You are... a crane. A crane cursed god. Then I shall... unleash the eagle cursed god. A servant cursed god captured deep in the mountains of Rakushu. This one... will pluck your beautiful feathers... and tear your flesh apart.”

At those words...

The black crane flinched in reaction. Nodding, Jakotsumaru returned the smile.

“As expected... it's frightening, isn't it? No matter how strong... or how long a cursed spirit lives... its true nature cannot be hidden. A natural enemy... is a terrifying thing...”

Jakotsumaru concentrated the spiritual energy within his body. Sensing the gathering of cursed power, the Black Crane's face began to twist.

(Even if it’s a natural enemy... I won't be intimidated...!) Kurotsuru calmly formed a seal. (Such primal fear... I overcame it long ago! Don't underestimate me!)

“Then prepare yourself. I shall present the starving pack to Kurotsuru-sama. As a final farewell in this life...” The cursed spirit user's lips curled into a sneer. That defiant smile reminded Kurotsuru of a predatory bird. The terror of being devoured by a natural enemy. Instinctive dread. For a cursed god boasting two thousand years, it was an all too pathetic display of panic. Kurotsuru abruptly used Onijuro's body as a shield.

(Can you kill me... along with this... this bastard?!)

"Ah... Worry... ...not... " But with a relieved voice, Onijuro laughed in resignation.

“He... understands. What he should do now... is not to save me... but... to... cut you down...” Onijuro's voice and breathing gradually steadied. Nodding, the exorcist flashed her white teeth. “Go on... you perverted peeping tom...”

“Here I come... you stubborn, underhanded girl...”

(Dieeeeeee!) Shaking, Kurotsuru charged forward first.

Pushing Onijuro aside, he sprinted straight ahead. The sword fell toward Jakotsumaru's skull. But at the same moment...

“Come forth! Cursed God...” The crystal unleashed a flash of light. In that instant, frantic flapping. The sound made Kurotsuru hesitate in his charge. Instinct halted his lunge.

To his back...

“Exorcism!”

(Guhhhhhhh!) Onijuro had thrust her blade all the way to the hilt. The tip, buried deep in Kurotsuru's back, pierced the incarnation's flesh and protruded from its chest. Dropping the sword, Kurotsuru clawed at its throat, gazing up at the dark clouds.

Before his eyes, a flock of white doves released from Jakotsumaru's crystal rose gracefully into the sky. Staring at the futile spectacle, the cursed god vomited forth its spiritual residue.

(You bastard!.. You fooled me!..)

“But... I had no choice... I couldn't defeat you otherwise. I had to deceive you...”

“It was... a momentary... opening...” Still clutching her sword, Onijuro continued. "In the end... the one who shows an opening loses. Before cursing human cunning... Tsuru... curse your own immaturity. Kuro."

There was no reply. Merely staring blankly, Kurotsuru watched the pigeons flitting about. With a final groan, the youth collapsed lifelessly onto the ground. Returning to the form of an aged, black-feathered great crane, the cursed god quietly ended its life.

“Gah...!” Onijuro collapsed to her knees. Her body bent over, her mouth nearly touching the ground. “That was a hell of a gamble... you bastard...!”

“...I never thought you could actually win...”

"Black Crane won't rest in peace after that... A picture-perfect... pathetic ambush..."

“But... we did it...” Onijuro and Jakotsumaru exchanged blood-stained glances. Smiles crept onto their faces. Yet they immediately recalled the excruciating pain, writhing on the ground.

“Well? ...Am I not a splendid trump card?”

“You noticed... I knew you would...”

“Without Onijuro-dono's words, who knows what would have happened...”

“But listen, Kurotsuru is waiting for us in hell right about now... writhing in agony, cursing humans for their cunning...”

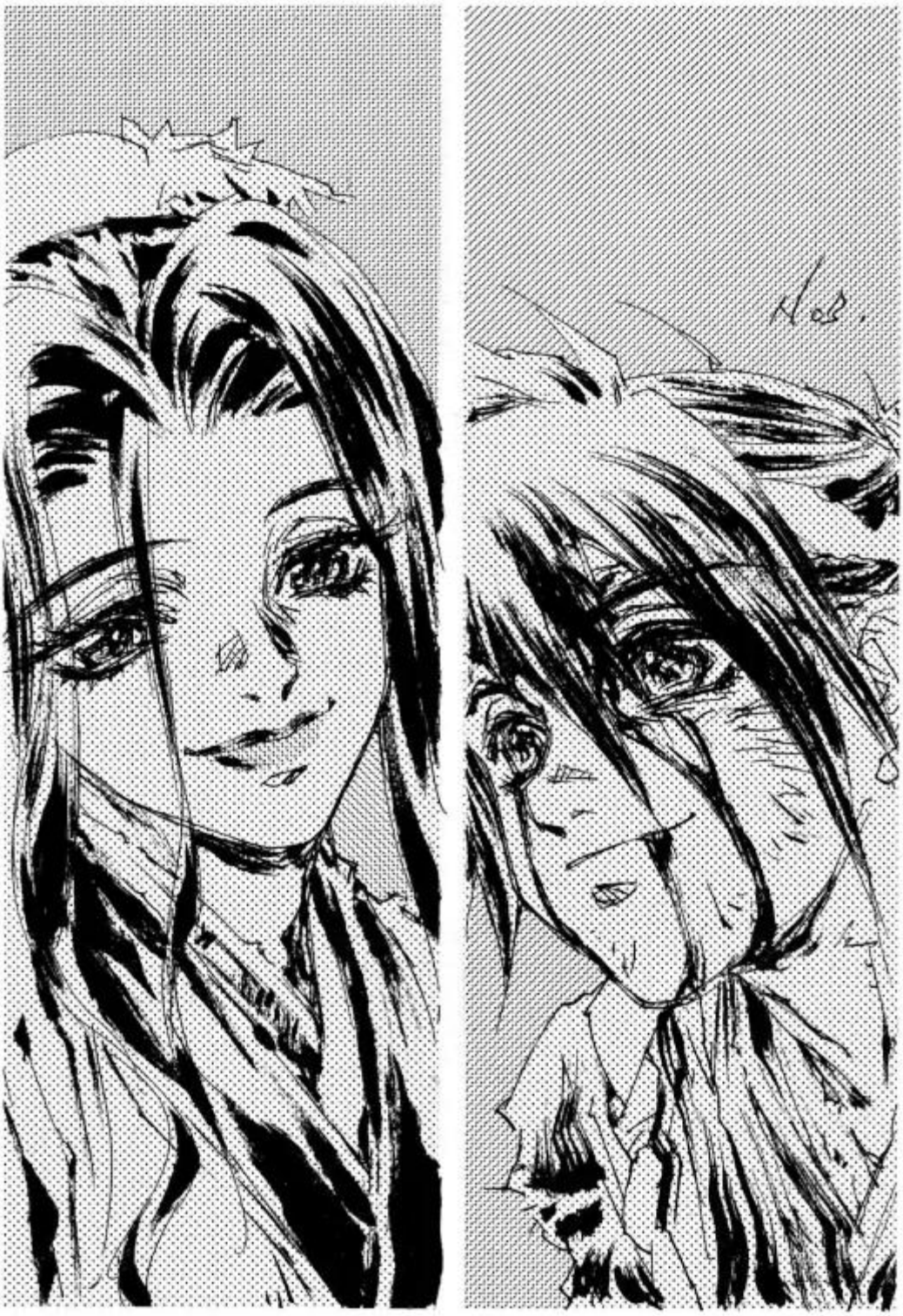
“That's cruel...! Onijuro-dono, you were the one who set him up...”

“Enough... I just told Kurotsuru... To not be fooled by you...”

Jakotsumaru was stunned. Stunned, but he laughed. Laughing sent pain shooting through him, yet he couldn't help but laugh.

“Really... we...”

“Ah... we did well...” Hands long numb were extended from both sides and clasped tightly. Confirming the warmth of the trembling hands, the two exchanged smiles for a moment. Dark clouds dispersed, and the wasteland gradually faded away. Even as the Black Crane's demon realm vanished, the two cursed spirit users' hands did not part. It was also the first handshake between these two polar opposites.



“Onijuro-sama!” Hōzōin's furious shout rang out. With a roar, the giant Baraoni charged straight at her.

(How annoying... you vermin... you'll... pay...!) The prolonged battle only fueled the cursed god's frustration. But the boy had been waiting for that impatience.

“Hōzōin-sama, get down!” The firecracker released from Matashirō's hand whirled through the night air. The ceramic shell, packed with spirit-infused gunpowder, was sucked into the cursed god's nape. The boy fled into the thicket, and the nun leapt backward.

“It took... a little longer than expected.”

(You… bi… tch...!) The blast was followed by the shockwave. That was the death rattle of the Baraoni. Its white-haired head shattered, its massive body crashing to the ground. Finally, wiping the sweat from her brow, Hōzōin looked upon the corpse of the old woman whose true form had been revealed.

“Hōzōin-sama, please pursue those two!” Crawling forward immediately, the boy cried out. “If Kurotsuru is the enemy, even those two...”

She silenced Matashirō's voice, and a flash of light erupted. From the center of the ruined castle, toward the direction of the command post. A purple light pierced the night sky, capturing the gaze of the two. Within that light...

“A pigeon...?”

“That's Jakotsumaru's...!” Shouting, the nun looked down at the boy. Matashiro met her gaze. There was no hesitation. Hōzōin hoisted Matashirō onto her shoulder, the boy dragging his injured leg. The eerie light guided them both toward their final battle, flickering repeatedly.

(So you've come...)

A voice sounded from somewhere.

Along with a resigned sense of defeat, the atmosphere was thick with despair, saturated in pitch blackness. The darkness that blanketed the wilderness was endless; nothing could be seen. The two cursed spirit users remained vigilant within it.

“Kurotsuru said... if he died, he'd reveal the princess's location.”

“Is this... that location?”

“Yeah... but it's a troublesome place...”

Onijuro leaned his dissatisfied face close to Jakotsumaru. The featureless darkness itself twitched its nose, sensing danger. The exorcist glared around him.

“This place is probably...” At the edge of his gaze...

Suddenly, two figures materialized. Where had they come from? A boy and a nun stumbled, tripping over their own feet in the middle of the void. Unnoticed, Onijuro called out to them.

“Matashiro! Hozōin-dono!”

Hearing their names, the pair turned their gaze. In that instant...

“Hiiii!” “You bastard, Black Crane's minion!”

Matashiro's eyes widened, Hozōin readied her spear. Stunned, Jakotsumaru swam through the darkness. “What are you talking about? It's me! Me!”

“Eh? Jakotsumaru-san...?” At the boy's words, Hōzōin's eyes widened. Straining to see the figure, the nun voiced her disbelief. “What? The real Jakotsumaru!”

“Of course! I'm not a fake!” At last, Jakotsumaru noticed too. The cursed spirit user's hair hung in messy tangles, her clothes torn to shreds. Her face, stained with blood and mud, bore no trace of her former handsome features.

Yet at the sight of the blood-soaked exorcist... both Matashiro and Hōzōin were speechless. The girl who had narrowly escaped death showed no attempt to hide her surging pride. Even her disciples instinctively stepped back at her fierce countenance. But paying them no mind, Onijūrō scanned the surroundings.

“Don't make too much noise. We're being watched...”

“I-Is that Kizu's Kurotsuru, Master?”
“Yeah, I already took care of him.”
“What?! Is that true, Jakotsumaru?!”
“Thanks to you, we're both in this state now...” Jakotsumaru smiled casually and began checking the location of the cursed energy. “But... it's not over yet. The enemy remains. The one who tried to slit the princess's belly...”
“Ah... And that one is...” Onijuro swallowed hard, steadying his breath. “The one who manipulated the poison lacquer monster and attacked the procession with a giant rock... For some reason I don't know... He sided with Kurotsuru... A human.”
(That's right...) Once more, a voice sounded from somewhere. The exorcist stepped forward, lifting his sword without effort. Her piercing gaze had already locked onto the enemy.
“Come out... and face me...” Onijuro supported her body with sheer willpower and advanced further. “Perhaps you'll quietly return the princess...”
Standing shoulder to shoulder, Jakotsumaru continued.
“With Kurotsuru dead, your scheme has failed. Further resistance is futile.”
The cursed spirit user's voice slowly seeped into the darkness.
“Wouldn't you rather stop now...?” Behind them, Matashiro and Hōzōin swiftly took defensive stances. But as if admonishing the four, the presence let out a low voice and a deep sigh.
(That is impossible...) The moment it spoke, a faint light flickered in the darkness. Far off, a large orange orb of light rose. Within that light, a crouching girl was trapped. The princess beneath the market woman's hat didn't move a muscle. A cry nearly escaped Jakotsumaru's throat.
(Don't worry... the ritual is still underway...)
“You mean the ritual to extract the charm stone?”
“Indeed,” it answered... and the presence materialized from the darkness. Right before the four of them.
(But to defeat Lord Kurotsuru...?) The lightly clad warrior in the lacquered hat murmured.
(To have come this far...)
Jakotsumaru's voice caught.
Matashiro's eyes darted about in panic.
Hōzōin's eyes blazed with fury.
All were speechless at the sight of that familiar figure. And then, Onijūrō...
Seizing her final enemy within reach, she swiftly raised the tip of his blade. Imperturbably, the exorcist addressed the warrior in the lacquered hat.
“What is this...?”
(I never expected to see you again...)
“Shut up,” Onijūrō spat. “How dare you betray us...”
(And all because of the Sakakibara family's sins...)
The young warrior drew his sword with a nonchalant expression.
(You must pay for deceiving Lord Kurotsuru and stealing the Mijū. I merely shared that resolve.)

“Then who was the one dead at the post station?” Jakotsumaru finally managed to squeeze out the words. The lacquered-hat samurai nodded sharply.
(A puppet bearing my likeness. By now, it has surely reverted to its true form as a paper doll...)
“So the puppet master aiding Kurotsuru is...”
(Indeed...)
The samurai resigned himself and raised his hat to Onijuro.
(Me, Obata Kanbee. Six hundred years ago, he was killed by the governor's faction...)
Onijūrō...
Was recalling her own words.
Was recalling her own thoughts.
(If we cross swords, it'll be a good fight...)
(That's what I thought at first...)
(Honest... truly, an honest man...)
(I believed in his feelings for the princess...)
(The samurai I had faith in...)
(At that time... I thought it was only you...)
(And when you died, I...)
The exorcist looked at Jakotsumaru without speaking. Jakotsumaru was already watching over Onijuro. With a gaze... almost tender... a gaze of pity. Yet, no words came forth. For an instant, remorse surged through Onijuro's heart. Anger tightened his grip on the sword hilt. In that instant...
“Regretting it now... is pointless, isn't it...”
Jakotsumaru murmured softly. That gentle voice...
…dispersed Onijuro's fury like clouds. Startled, the exorcist looked at the cursed spirit user again. There stood the gentle-looking man, shrugging his shoulders.
(That's right... It's too late now...) Coming to her senses, Onijuro calmed her heart.
(I relied on him because he was an ally... That's all...)
Only now did Onijuro find Jakotsumaru's presence puzzling. Onijuro always guarded against showing weakness, yet Jakotsumaru skillfully exploited those openings. Even now, struck unexpectedly, her anger had suddenly subsided. And that...
(Somehow... it feels comforting...)
Taking a deep breath, Onijuro calmly positioned her sword tip in a standard stance. Kanbee, expressionless, held his naginata at his side. A stance without a single flaw, that of a true warrior. Kanbee's posture sent a shiver of tension through Onijuro.
(When we first met, I thought he was capable... But now... it's different A coldness dwells within his sword's path...)
“Master, please...”
“Leave this one to me...” Holding back her advancing disciple, Onijuro commanded from behind. Her gaze never left Kanbee. The exorcist's voice rang out with resolve.
“Rescue the princess... rescue Chizuru!” But faster than his voice, Jakotsumaru had already leaped. Hozōin followed his sprint, and both soared through the darkness.
“Hozoin-sama, what of your three-day hangover?”

“What nonsense! There's nothing left to vomit!” Yet before them, a horde of monstrous forms suddenly burst forth. Dozens of shuddering creatures emerged from the darkness. As black shadows attacked from both sides, Kanbee's shrill roar split the air.

“Don't let them escape! Slay them, Black Wolf Demons!” Kanbee roared at the puppet horde. “There’s just two of them! Shred them to dust!”

Surrounding Jakotsumaru and the others was a pack of giant mountain dogs. Wolves over six feet tall, each standing upright on hind legs, ravenous with hunger. Their backs and upper arms were covered in glossy black shells. They were nothing but brutal, uncontrollable wolf puppets.

“What nonsense! Mountain dogs, indeed!” Jakotsumaru shouted, channeling his dwindling spiritual energy into the crystal orb. As the monster let out strange, groaning cries of “Ioo, Ioo,” the Hand of the Cursed God reached out.

“Go! Enra Enra!” Immediately after...

“Retreat, Jakotsumaru!” Hōzōin's body slam sent Jakotsumaru flying. The nun's spear pushed back the onrushing pack of roaring beasts. The fallen cursed spirit user stared intently at the crystal, which showed no reaction.

“Wait a moment! What is going on here?”

“Don't you understand! This is his cursed realm!”

Hōzōin's warning rang out, her voice tinged with irritation.

“Our cursed spirits won't respond! Go without them!”

“Is this like Onijuro-dono's Takamagahara?! How troublesome!”

Speechless, Jakotsumaru leapt backward. Instantly, in its place, Yatsushiro's sword stood beside Hozōin's spear. “Jakotsumaru, back!”

“A-Are you alright, Matashiro-kun?!” Over the worried voices, the clash of blades echoed. Simultaneously, the puppets screamed. Parrying the Black Wolf Demon's claws with his sword, the boy crouched low.

“No need for concern! I am, after all, Aoi Onijuro-sama's foremost disciple, though a lowly exorcist, I may be!”

“Oh, how reassuring!” Hōzōin swung her spear joyfully. “Then I shall join you! This is my repayment for last night's rice gruel!”

But Jakotsumaru showed visible panic. “Hozoin-sama! Yatsushiro-kun is still training!”

“And what of it!”

“It's Onijuro-sama's catchphrase! He always says, ‘You, your sword skills...’”

Shouts clashed in the darkness.

Yet Yatsushiro boldly raised his sword and plunged into the swarm of puppets. The Black Wolf Demon mercilessly formed a circle to intercept him. But at the center of the encirclement, the boy roared with a spirit of sheer determination.

“Break the Demon!” From right to left, Matashiro swept his sword horizontally. The blade traced a wide arc, its speed reminiscent of a whirlwind. Then, right within the puppets' midst, Matashiro clicked the blade back into its sheath. Only then did five puppets split cleanly in two, falling dead. The creature struck by the slash revealed its true form as a mountain dog and collapsed into the darkness.

Instantly, turning to face Matashiro, Jakotsumaru offered a weak smile.

“...H-Honestly... Matashiro-kun... Your sword skills are truly lacking...”
Meanwhile...
Onijuro and Kanbee continued to glare at each other. They kept their distance, holding their breath. Both aiming for the decisive strike, locked eyes, not moving an inch.
Right beside them, Hozouin and Matashiro were cutting through the puppets' encirclement. They closed in on Chizuru, still enveloped in the sphere of light. Jakotsumaru followed behind them.
“Lady Chizuru!” Jakotsumaru's cry trembled. “It is Jakotsumaru, Lady Chizuru! Princess!” But there was no response. Instead, multiple shadows rose around the light sphere. Fetus-like figures, entirely covered in wrinkles and pitch black. These infants formed a circle around Chizuru, chanting a secret incantation with single-minded focus.
“I won't let you!”
(Those bastards are my ritual puppets...)
Staring down Onijuro, Kanbee declared.
(The cursed spirits extracting the charm... soon it shall be fulfilled)
Turning abruptly, Jakotsumaru shouted. But Kanbee didn't even blink, wearing a defiant smile.
(To stop them, you must cut down this Kanbee. Without my cursed power, the ritual cannot continue.)
Jakotsumaru clenched his fist. Hōzōin readied her spear, and Matashirō steadied his breath. But sensing the three scattering behind them, Onijūrō issued a warning.
“Quiet... They are not your enemies...”
She silenced them and fixed Kanbee with a glare.
“I will slay this one. But before that...”
(You wish to hear my inner thoughts...?)
Her intentions exposed, Onijuro widened the distance between them.
“I think that much is permissible...”
(Despite me deceiving you...?)
“You're a bad man too... From the start... you were working with Kurotsuru...”
Onijuro's lips twisted with hatred. But Kanbee sighed and began choosing his words slowly.
(...As I just said. When Sakakibara Tadamasa seized the jewel, they... even killed the innocent Meiju. Meiju left behind a young daughter... that daughter was raised by Lord Kurotsuru. And that daughter...)
“...conceived a child with Kurotsuru. So you're one of his descendants, then...”
For a moment, Kanbee remained silent. But Onijuro already understood.
“So you too... are a half-cursed spirit...”
(Yes... descendants bearing both human and cursed spirit blood... Our clan prayed for Lord Kurotsuru's recovery for generations, cursing the Sakakibara family. And when a princess bearing the Mijū finally was born... that's when I infiltrated the Sakakibara household. Using cursed spirits, I deceived everyone in the house, including the governor Yasumasa, and became Chizuru's guard...)
“So you were chosen because you're a puppeteer?”

The cursed spirit user pressed on. “Both humans and cursed spirits possess hearts. But the Mijū is an object that steals those hearts. It possesses the power to draw others in and enchant them. Once enchanted, one cannot possibly harm the bearer of the Mijū—not even Kurotsuru... yet they can become a puppet.”

“Yes, because puppets have no hearts...” Onijuro added her words. “That's why... Kurotsuru chose you. Someone who could control a puppet without a heart. And at that crossing, it made you attack the Princess. A puppet could slit the Princess's belly. It wouldn't flinch at her screams of protest. It could even chop off her struggling arms. But..." The exorcist grimaced at her throbbing wound. “...Could you do it? Could you command those puppets? Order them to slit the Princess's belly? To seize the Bead of Grace? To kill the Princess?”

“It's something a human with a heart couldn't do...” Jakotsumaru's voice seeped deep into the darkness. “I have yet to see the Princess's face... But the Chizuru-sama I sensed through the thin silk... is... utterly beyond harming! In fact, not even a finger should touch her! The only ones capable of hurting such a Princess... are puppets...”

“Yes, only those without a heart...” As Onijuro muttered, Kanbee swiftly extended both arms. His sword, held at mid-level, closed straight in on Onijuro. Jakotsumaru waited silently for the inevitable moment. The distance between Onijuro and Kanbee rapidly narrowed.

“Why... did you hire me?” Onijuro spoke as if suddenly remembering. “Didn't you find me a hindrance?”

(Of course I did... but I reasoned like this... If a famed exorcist from the continent served as escort, both the Governor and Lord Nagamori... and the Princess would feel secure. And when they relax... an opening will inevitably appear.)

“And you exploited that opening to separate me from the procession... slaughtering all your men...” The exorcist remained unflinching under the pressure of the blade. Onijuro lifted the tip of her sword just slightly.

(All of that was to reclaim the Mijū.)

“And to reclaim the Bead... to slit the princess's belly, you say you abandoned your heart?” As if to confirm... Onijuro let her voice echo in the darkness.

Kanbee stared intently at the exorcist for a moment. His gaze probed every inch of Onijuro's body. (To achieve one's goal... it is unavoidable that something must be discarded... Weaknesses and hearts... are useless things...)

“Kurotsuru... also believed that and died...” Onijuro recalled the pitiful cursed god. “Kurotsuru too... believed he had no weaknesses. That became his undoing. He was struck down by a weakness he himself had forgotten... and fell by my blade. Such is the nature of weakness and heart... Things you wish to forget, yet cannot. Things you try to cast aside, yet cannot. I am no different.”

(Onijuro-dono, so you have weaknesses too?)

At that moment...

“Ah... weaknesses I'd rather discard... and secrets that must never be known.”

Jakotsumaru was stunned. He stared blankly at Onijuro's smiling face. Onijuro's... refreshing smile. Not the smile of an exorcist, but simply... the smile of a girl. Onijuro was smiling at him like that.

"I... tried to be ‘Constant’ as an exorcist. I shouldn't be swayed by emotion, or carry the feelings of a woman... And if I had remained that ‘constant’ self... if I had continued to despise cursed spirit users... I would never have teamed up with Jakotsumaru."

“Why... why bring this up suddenly...”

To the flustered Jakotsumaru, Onijuro gave a small nod.

“If you hadn't been there... I couldn't have defeated Kurotsuru alone. Thinking about that... all this time, clinging to ‘Constant’... clinging to pride as an exorcist... it all seems... ridiculous now...”

(What the hell are you talking about...?)

“I'm talking about you...” Turning once more to the puzzled Obata, Onijuro faced him. With the face of an exorcist. “You too... couldn't have abandoned your heart from infancy. Once, you must have trembled in fear of the darkness, buried your face in your chest and wept.”

(What utter nonsense!)

“It's no nonsense. Knowing your own weakness... seeking salvation from someone else. That... heart... combined with mine and the Jako… tsumaru's power. And we were able to slay Kurotsuru... If you were to regain your heart, couldn't you too... accomplish something beyond your wildest dreams?”

(Reclaim my heart and abandon six hundred years of grudge, you say?! Cut the nonsense!)

“But it was precisely because he held onto that grudge... that Kurotsuru died. Had he let go of his hatred, perhaps he could have lived differently.”

But Kanbee thrust himself forward. (How could I abandon this grudge! How could I regain a human heart! Why can't you understand! This grudge... this stubbornness... how many sword strikes it can produce... You can test it with your own blade!)

The sword pressure surged... Kanbee swung his naginata down from high above.

“Hear me out, Kanbee!” Onijuro's sword deflected the strike. But Kanbee swiftly pivoted his blade and lunged at Onijuro again. Onijuro parried in time, and the two locked in a fierce tsuba clash.

“Kurotsuru is dead! Even if you take the Bijuu here...!”

(What's the point of saying that now! Are you telling me to back down?!) Kanbee, his rage exposed, thrust his blade forward. (Indeed, Lord Kurotsuru is dead! But I cannot retreat now! Reclaiming the Bijū is the Kizutani clan's deepest wish! Even if I stand alone, I will take back the Bijū!)

“Then... isn't this just pure stubbornness?!”

Hōzōin's spear struck down the Black Wolf Demon closing in from behind. Protected by Matashirō's sword, Jakotsumaru cried out in anguish. “Reclaiming it would be meaningless! Your grievances should have been made clear enough to the Sakakibara family! Can't you just retreat now?!”

(Retreat?! After waiting six hundred years, finally reaching the moment to reclaim it... Are you telling me to silently give up, let my clan be slaughtered by you scum?! I haven't taken my revenge on the Sakakibara clan yet! Until I reclaim the Bijū, my grudge will never be satisfied!)

“No, you've already taken your revenge!” Onijūrō also roared. “You Kizutani scum! How many hundreds do you think you've slaughtered?! After taking so many lives, you still haven't had your fill of killing?!”

(Oh, no! It's nowhere near enough!) Kanbee roared before the exorcist. (Even if we slaughter every last Sakakibara, our hatred won't be appeased! Not until we reclaim the bewitching jewel!)

“You...!” Onijuro recalled the devastation at the Nofuri Inn. The mountains of corpses slaughtered by the cursed spirits. Nagamori's pitiful end...

Kanbee's blade closed in sharply on Onijuro. (They stole it! They deceived us! What's wrong with those who committed evil deeds receiving their just punishment!)

“That was six hundred years ago!” Jakotsumaru shouted again. “What you killed has no connection whatsoever...”

“Shut your mouth, you third-rate onnagata!” With a piercing sound that struck fear into those around him, the exorcist silenced Jakotsumaru. Nearby, Matashiro and Hōzōin desperately sought a way to break through. The beastly cries of the puppets mingled with the clash of swords. Pushing through the din, Onijūrō's furious voice echoed through the darkness. “I cannot forgive you! That you hold human life so cheap! That you think it acceptable to kill as many as you please! Do you truly crave killing so much?!”

(Guh... Guhh...!)

How could such immense strength surge from that blood-soaked body? Onijuro braced her legs, pushing back Jakotsumaru's sword. Kanbee bared his fangs at the exorcist pressing against the blade.

(I must have the Bead of Seduction! No matter how many Sakakibara men die! I don't need a heart! Weakness... weakness comes from the heart...!)

A torrent of fury erupted from Onijuro's blade. Roaring from the depths of her gut, the exorcist pushed Kanbee's body back.

“You, who killed to steal the Mijū, who lost your heart... aren't you just the same as those who stole it from Kurotsuru?!”

(Shut your filthy mouth!) In the split second of tearing fabric, all eyes focused on them.

Kanbee's sword became a strike of utter intensity, pushing back the exorcist's tachi. As she retreated, Onijuro raised her sword. But Kanbee had read that movement. He parried the sword upward, striking Onijuro's blade. The demon exorcist's sword, struck on its ridge, split clean in two with a shrill metallic clang.

“Onijuro-sama!” Jakotsumaru's scream flew toward the demon exorcist who had lost her sword. But Kanbee's sword was faster than the cry. The single stroke aimed for his throat had already reached Onijuro's mouth.

(Dieeeee!) The puppeteer's scream shook the darkness. But Onijuro's movement defied Kanbee's expectations. Dropping the now useless weapon from his hand, the

exorcist became truly empty-handed. Simultaneously, her left arm met Kanbee's sword.

“Demon-Bane Repel!” With gauntlets reinforced with copper, Onijuro deflected the blow with a wide swing. Losing her balance, Kanbee stumbled forward like a drowning man. The exorcist's fist drove into his chest. Five fingers, bent at a precise angle, pierced through his haori, tore through flesh, and sank sharply between his ribs. Gripping Kanbee's twitching heart, Onijuro closed her eyes to the loser's groan.

(Gah, gah, gah...!) The pack of Black Wolf Demons vanished from before the Hozōin group. Then the chanting of the ritual puppets ceased, and when all had vanished...

(I... I... I am...) A gush of blood spilled from Kanbee's mouth. Withdrawing her fist from the limp body, Onijuro laid the puppet master down in the darkness.

“Ah... I understand. You, Kanbee... you still cling to a shred of humanity. Otherwise, you wouldn't have been angered by my words. Even to dwell on vengeance, a heart is needed. Perhaps... you hesitated even slightly during Lady Chizuru's ritual...” Whispering, Onijuro closed Kanbee's eyelids with her blood-stained hand.

“It was impossible from the start. You couldn't abandon your pride or your hatred, even if you wanted to. And you, believing you had discarded your very heart, threw yourself into slaughter...” Her words faltered. Stuck there, the exorcist collapsed to her knees.

“Master!” The cursed realm began to dissipate. As the decaying headquarters revealed their true form, the boy swiftly rushed to the fallen Onijuro. “Well done... well done for fighting this far...”

“No... no flattery needed... Is Jakotsumaru here...”

The cursed spirit user stood silently by her side. An exasperated voice flew from the exorcist's mouth.

“What's that look... Don't make that gloomy face... I'm still alive like this...”

“Yes, truly...” Snaking down his throat, he fought back a sob, savoring the victory with every fiber of his being. Looking down at Onijuro with tear-filled eyes, the cursed spirit user sniffed. “You really won, and you're alive… Truly, you are the continent's greatest demon exorcist... Aoi Onijuro-sama...”

"I told you no flattery, you fool! But... did you forget...?" The exhausted exorcist no longer had the strength to open his eyes. Lying on his side, Onijuro pointed toward the distance. “Take care of the princess... I'll be gone for a while... fuu... no more...”

“...Master? Master!” The boy's cry clung to Onijuro as consciousness closed in on her. But Jakotsumaru smiled with relief. This girl wasn't the type to die here now. Even after fighting alongside her for just a few days, he was certain of that much. Even if they were polar opposites, Onijuro was undoubtedly the continent's greatest exorcist.

“Jakotsumaru-sama...” Called, the cursed spirit user turned. And the instant he turned... he couldn't move. The floor of the Jinya was bare earth. Unidentifiable objects were scattered everywhere. The unlit room was filled with a musty stench, the worst possible conditions for an audience.

Yet upon that earthen floor... sat the glittering splendor of the galaxy. In the darkness, the brilliance of constellations had descended. Jakotsumaru truly believed it. He had no choice but to believe it—it was breathtakingly beautiful.

Chizuru was in Hōzōin's hands. The true face of Chizuru, whom Jakotsumaru had longed for, stared straight at the cursed spirit user.

Her flowing black hair shimmered even in the night, forming a lovely contrast with her plump white cheeks. And those eyes. Her twin pupils, painted a deep black, were covered by long lashes. Stared at directly by those eyes, Jakotsumaru was frozen in place. No, it wasn't paralysis. For these eyes, he could do anything. He didn't want to see them clouded. They held a light that made him feel that way.

“Jakotsumaru-sama, it's my...” A pure voice escaped her cherry-blossom-pink lips. “...my fault everyone died... Because of the bewitching pearl inside me...”

“...I hear you...” That was all he could manage. His throat felt unnaturally dry. But Chizuru, unaware of his agitation, bowed her head slightly.

“You didn't have to save me... I wanted to die with everyone else...”

“What are you saying?!” For the first time, Jakotsumaru bowed low and found his voice. “They all died protecting you, Princess! If you lose your life now, their deaths will have been for nothing!”

“What good is it for me alone to survive?!” The anguished voice tightened Jikotsumaru's chest. “Even if I am to marry into the Sanzu family, to lose so many of the Sakakibara retainers like this, and then... and then...”

She choked on her words and began to sob. Hōzōin supported her small back, but Jakotsumaru could not continue with words of comfort. That thin, wailing cry violently shook the cursed spirit user’s heart.

“...Just one thing, just one thing, Princess, please do not forget...” Jakotsumaru forced the words out. “These past days, countless... lives have been lost surrounding Your Highness. Both allies and foes...”

Chizuru listened to his words from within the nun's embrace.

“The enemies sought to take your life, while your allies tried to protect you. Yet you... you survived. Safe and sound, just as you are now...”

“But isn't that upon the corpses of everyone else...?”

“Yes. Therefore, please... do not forget those corpses... Please remember the feelings of all those corpses...” Jakotsumaru pictured everyone's faces in his mind. Nagamori, Kanbee, Kurotsuru, the nameless cursed god, the retainers... The same scene spread within Chizuru's heart.

“This is the life you all protected... There is no question of death... Having survived, do something for those who remain alive...”

“Those who remain alive...?”

Chizuru gazed up at Hōzōin in a daze. But the nun did not answer. Instead, Jakotsumaru continued.

“Indeed... Since you are to marry into the domain of Zenshu, then for the people of Zenshu, for the vassals of Zenshu, and for the cursed god of Zenshu...”

“.....”

"For those who live, for those with hearts, do something you can do. Lady Chizuru, you possess the power to draw people to you. You should use that power to the fullest...”

“But for the sake of this bewitching jewel...” Before Chizuru could finish, Hōzōin quietly silenced her.

“The bewitching jewel within you bears no sin. And of course, neither do you yourself. The life we have all sworn to protect, and the bewitching jewel - treasure them.”

Jakotsumaru bowed deeply once more.

“One must not die for the sake of the dead. That would be the same as Kanbee-san... losing one's heart to vengeance and dying. Live for the sake of those who live. If you lament the loss of a thousand lives, then cherish ten thousand lives. That, too, will be an offering for the departed...”

Chizuru nodded and began sobbing again. But Hōzōin showed a relieved smile. She looked at the nun and the boy, and Jakotsumaru exhaled.

(That's right, Onijūrō-dono... There's no need to die... Princess... Just keep living, forever and ever...)

The Cursed Spirit User gazed once more at the motionless exorcist. But Onijuro, exhausted from battle, abandoned any attempt to rise, choosing instead to surrender herself to the embrace of compassion for a while longer.

Beneath the sky turning pale with dawn, Chizuru's choked sobs echoed endlessly through the ruined castle.

The highway overlooked the provincial capital below.

Gentle hills were covered in golden wheat, the early autumn breeze rustling the sea of ears. The road leading to the hilltops was bathed in clear sky, and the faces of passing travelers all wore bright smiles.

“What shall we do, Master?”

“Whichever path we take, we'll eventually reach somewhere on the continent. As usual, let's ask this guy...”

The road branched into three directions atop the hill. A moss-covered stone statue sat at the crossroads like a signpost. Leaning against it, the exorcist drew her new sword from its scabbard at her waist.

“Well, which way do you want to go...?”

Placing the tsuba on the ground, Onijuro lightly tapped the hilt of the raised sword. Clang! The tachi indicated the central path. Master and disciple smiled, glancing back over their shoulders.

“It's decided. We take this road. Over Suzaku Pass... likely to Hara Province. This means farewell to you lot.”

“What are you doing with a sword you just received...?”

Jakotsumaru rose from the roadside, stroking his aching wound.

“It's a Kikuichimonji Muramasa. How could the young lord of Zenshu part with it? It's a peerless blade, isn't it?”

“Enough. It's my sword now. Just because it's a reward, I won't display it in the alcove. Ornamental swords suit my taste not at all.” With that, Onijūrō awkwardly

sheathed the blade. Beneath her black travel garb, her body was still wrapped in white cloth. Matashirō supported his limping master, offering a gentle smile.

“Where are you heading now, Jakotsumaru-san?”

“Back to Unshu. This journey was merely a detour to begin with...” Clacking her staff, Hōzōin cast her gaze downward. The capital of Nanzō, abuzz with wedding celebrations, was in the midst of its liveliest hour. By now, the town must be at the peak of celebration. Watching the commotion, the nun turned her smile back to Jakotsumaru. “But... you truly have no regrets?”

“A marriage between two feudal lords' families? It's hardly a ceremony we could attend.”

“But you were invited, after all...”
The exorcist forcibly twisted the pouting ear.
“Didn't you see it too? That mountain of rare delicacies from land and sea, the rows of sake barrels... Three days and nights of drunken revelry would only hinder your training! You'd fall into depravity!”
“Ow! That hurts, Master!”
“Was Hōzōin-sama also there for the sake?”
“I'll pass on the sake for a while... I've been through quite a lot this time...”
Swarms of dragonflies skimmed over the waves of wheat stalks. For a moment, they gazed down upon Chizuru's wedding, then let the autumn breeze carry them away.
“I owe you one...”
“It was brief, but I'm glad I got to know a cursed spirit user like you and fight alongside you. We'll likely never meet again... but live well.”
“I never thought I'd hear words like that from you, Onijūrō-dono...”
Jakotsumaru also stared at the exorcist, puzzled.
"But... I feel the same. Just knowing there are exorcists like you out there... it makes me happy somehow. I think Hōzōin-sama feels the same."
But snorting harshly, Onijūrō glared at the cursed spirit user with obvious distaste.
“Anyway, cut back on the drinking! You're going too far! You serve the Twelve Heavenly Gods, after all!”
“Onijuro-dono, please refrain from such uncouth behavior...” Hōzōin-sama concealed her chuckling mouth with her sleeve. “A marriageable daughter acting so disgracefully... How could any suitor possibly take her then...”
“Shut up! I've forgotten about men!”
“But you haven't given up on women, have you?” At Jakotsumaru's words, Onijuro let out an irritated gnashing of teeth. Pulling her newly made, tightly woven straw hat down low, the exorcist strode forward resolutely.
“Let's go, Matashiro! Talking to these fools makes my brain rot! We're leaving!”
“How splendid, a daimyo's journey with a thousand ryō reward... You could live in luxury for the rest of your life...”
“That's not quite right, Jakotsumaru-san.” The boy flatly contradicted the cursed spirit user's assumption. “My master... didn't receive the reward.”
“Wh-what do you mean?!”
"After losing so many guards, how could I possibly accept money while they're gone! The fifty ryo advance as preparation money... that alone is enough."
“But, Lady Chizuru arrived safely here...”
“No”, the exorcist cut off Hōzōin. “Unshū lost many soldiers. They'll need money from now on. It's better to use it for the country than pay a fortune to someone like me.”
“...That's the reason.” Matashiro tightened the cord on his woven hat. “I do feel a little regretful... but I agree with what Master says...”
“You truly are a loyal disciple, Matashiro.”
“Besides, with fifty ryo, the two of us can live for a while without doing exorcism work...” The boy clung to Onijuro as he turned away.
“Well then, Jakotsumaru-san, Hōzōin-sama, take care.”

“Will we meet again, Onijuro-sama?” Jakotsumaru raised his hand to the demon exorcist gazing up at the azure sky. “Might we meet again somewhere on the continent?”

“The continent is vast! We'll never meet again!”

“But... on that continent... we met! Surely we'll meet again...” The curse spirit user's words spread across the wheat field. “...We'll definitely meet again, right?”

Matashiro stared intently up at his master's silence. The demon exorcist, who had stopped walking, hid her face under her hat and coldly hurled farewell words.

“Don't ever show your face again! You third-rate onnagata!”

(So stubborn...) Smiling, Jakotsumaru pulled a sheet of paper from his robe. Guiding a faint thread of cursed spirit from his fingertips, the Cursed Spirit User flicked the scrap into the air. The paper, dancing in the wind, seemed to gain its own will, gliding swiftly toward Matashiro.

“Wh-what... is this...?” The moment the paper stuck to his woven hat, the boy flushed crimson and fell silent. Jakotsumaru smiled brightly and waved to his master and disciple.

“Take care, both of you! That's a small token of my farewell gift! Cherish it well!”

The trembling boy's hand clutched a single colored painting. The flushed, young, supple form of a girl seen from behind, her skin glowing in the steam. But before Matashiro could get a proper look, the nude painting was sliced clean in two.

“Hold it right there, you pervert!” The demon-slayer, sword drawn, was already leaping through the air. “Time to test my new blade! Think you'll live, do you?!”

“Hiiii! Master!”

“I'll never forget it! Not even the back scrubbing...”

Somewhere, a mountain bird chirped. The land was also approaching deep autumn. Amidst the wedding festivities' clamor, the frenzy briefly enlivened the highway.

【Afterword by Takeo Ichikawa】

Before writing this work at all...
Back then...
I did aspire to write proper historical fiction. Honestly.
Reading Ikenami Shotaro and Shiba Ryotaro alongside SF and fantasy novels, it was only natural I'd think, “I want to write period dramas.”
When I picked up the famous historical record “The Chronicles of Lord Nobunaga” to gather material about Oda Nobunaga, well... it's fascinating, isn't it?
Especially the passage just before the Honnoji Incident, where Takeda Katsuyori of Kai is defeated—it's one “Huh... so that happened too?” moment after another.
The female warrior of the Takeda clan who drew her sword and displayed an unprecedented fighting style. A handsome young warrior named Kakuunsa of Shimosone, and even a traitor with a name like that, which sounds like a villain straight out of a story—it made me think, “Alright, I'll use this area as my subject and write a story myself!” and I got all fired up...
When you start matching facts—where this person was that day, how that incident wouldn't happen for another two months—the story gets tied up in knots... completely immobilized.
And if you buy books to do proper historical research, it's endless. But you can't neglect it either. Ah, what should I do? I was thinking...
“You don't want to write that kind of novel, do you?”
Was it divine revelation or a devil's whisper...?
“Just write whatever fun novel you want, freely and without restraint.”
“You don't need Japan to write period dramas. Create a world where you can write any period drama you like.”
“Make up a Japan where magic exists and monsters roam. Just invent it.”
Guess it was too much to ask after all.
Slotting the stories I envision, the stories I want to write, into actual history seems incredibly difficult. Thanks to that, I was able to rethink the historical drama I truly want to write.
For example... A samurai possessing transcendent power engages in a deadly struggle against monsters beyond human comprehension. Warlords commanding yokai, ninja, and karakuri machines vie for supremacy in the demon realm. That's the kind of story I wanted to write.
But then, there are already plenty of alternate world fantasies modeled on medieval Europe. So why not just create an alternate world fantasy modeled on Japan? That's the world where the fantasy novel I want to write truly belongs.
I immediately began designing the world and its story.
I'd make it a world even larger than the Eurasian continent. Some regions would be swept by the storm of war, while others would enjoy a peaceful era reminiscent of Japan's Genroku period...
And then, the swordsman who wields the magic of this world, cursed spirits. And the weakling entangled with that swordsman.

Thus, my Japan, called “The Continent,” and the story of the exorcist, Onijuro, were born.
This time, I'm deeply honored to have received the runner-up selection, but I'm filled with the question: “So, what do the people who actually read my novel think?”
I believe the quality of the work is something each and every reader feels for themselves. Was it interesting? Or boring? Please, tell me. That will surely be nourishment for my soul.
Until we meet again somewhere on the “Continent,”
or perhaps in another world...

December 1998

Takeo Ichikawa

【Commentary by the Fujimi Fantasia Bunko Editorial Department】

Did you all enjoy it?

As some of you may know, this work won the Honorable Mention in the 10th Fantasia Long Novel Award.
This year saw the highest number of entries ever, with a remarkably high level of both quantity and quality, making for an extremely fierce competition. As a work that emerged victorious from that battle, it is brimming with power and individuality.
What were your impressions after reading the opening pages?
Five samurai facing off in a downpour. A quiet conversation, yet one filled with anger and tension. And then, as if unable to withstand that tension any longer, the battle begins abruptly—.
Oh, what a truly orthodox, epic novel-worthy opening!
Many readers' hearts surely raced with anticipation for a serious, hard-hitting story.
But that expectation is swiftly overturned.
Because, well, the characters are all a bunch of oddballs, each with their own quirks.
A sixteen-year-old beautiful swordswoman hailed as the continent's finest exorcist. Yet her words and actions make her seem like a stubborn, hot-headed kid boss—Aoi Onijuro.
A skilled cursed spirit user, yet a flamboyant, effeminate man who wears elaborate makeup and stylishly dons luxurious long-sleeved robes, and to top it off, has a bizarre obsession with young girls—Jakotsumaru.
A young apprentice named Matashiro who loyally follows Kijuro, only to be constantly scolded and bullied by his master.
Jakotsumaru's foster parent, a rather beautiful woman in her mid-thirties (or so she appears), though lacking in character. However, she flies into hysterics when her age is mentioned. Furthermore, she's an unparalleled drunkard, and when she gets drunk, she becomes a destructive nun who's impossible to handle—Hōzōin.
Honestly, these are some outrageous characters, right? They could easily destroy the worldview of the work if handled poorly.
But here's the thing—these guys move around with such vivid energy.
They even pull out the charm of supporting characters who might otherwise get lost in the story, shining light into every corner of the work.
Far from destroying the worldview, they actively elevate it.
When you hear “fantasy novel,” many readers probably think it's difficult. But this author takes a story with a worldview that could easily feel heavy, letting the characters run wild—sometimes serious, sometimes comedic—drawing the reader in and never letting boredom set in.
He possesses technique far beyond what you'd expect from a newcomer.
So, if you read the opening and thought, “This might be a bit tough,” rest assured. This novel is undeniably interesting.

Now, if you actually read it and found it interesting! You have something you must do.

No matter how much talent and skill he possesses, author Takeo Ichikawa is still a fledgling bird, having just debuted with this work. For him to soar into the sky, he needs your affection.

It is solely the power of readers that nurtures writers. Come on, recommend it to your friends! Send in the survey postcard! Write the author a letter of support!

Translator's note:

> Hi guys! NineSoulsSea here, hope you enjoyed this translation of **Takeo Ichikawa**'s very first and very good work, **Exorcist Onijuro: When the Jewel Turns Crimson**! As always, a special thank you goes out to **aNobody101** for telling me about the method to obtain BookWalker raws which I'm sure I'll continue to utilize in the future! Like I said in my translation of TATTOO BLADE, another work by Ichikawa, his stuff is prime material for an anime adaptation – and whereas Tattoo Blade is more fitting for an episodical nekketsu shonen series, Onijuro's journey would look amazing as a multiple-episode OVA! But alas, I'm pretty sure Japan's economic bubble burst before it was published so no luck there. But maybe one day… Oh well! Next up will be **Dark Frontier Blues**! Get excited!

And that's about it! Thank you for reading and have a truly spiritual day!